

ONE:  
INTRODUCTION: IMPRESSIONISM,  
CONSUMER CULTURE AND MODERN  
WOMEN



Shall I tell you what was the finest thing I ever produced since I first began to work, and the one which I recall with the greatest pleasure? It's quite a story . . . I produced a perfect work of art. I took the dishes, the plates, the pans, and the jars, and arranged the different colors; I devised a wonderful picture of still life, with subtle scales of tints leading up to brilliant flashes of color. . . . It was something barbaric and superb, suggesting a paunch amid a halo of glory; but there was such a cutting sarcastic touch about it all that people crowded to the window, alarmed by the fierce flare of the shop front.

Emile Zola, *Le ventre de Paris*, 1873<sup>1</sup>

Zola's 1873 novel, *Le ventre de Paris*, published a year before the first Impressionist exhibition, includes an avant-garde artist, Claude Lantier, who was based on Manet and the Impressionists. In this novel about Les Halles, Zola portrays his artist as obsessed with the market and keenly aware of its role in the epochal changes the capital is undergoing.<sup>2</sup> Yet Claude remains a passionate observer who cannot depict the market in his paintings. In his own judgment, his best "work" was a startling "still life," in which he turned the glittering goods in the window of a recently opened charcuterie from an appetizing display of pork products into a sarcastic critique. Lantier's "heroic" oppositional act was ephemeral and doomed to failure. Were the painters of modern life equally incapable of representing the developments associated with consumer culture in their paintings? Did they represent them, and if so, did their representations convey a criticism in Claude Lantier's manner? Or did their works chart a different course from that short-lived revolution and lasting failure?

Both Impressionist painting and Parisian consumer culture developed from the 1860s onwards. This evolution took place in Paris, the city that in the

nineteenth century “became a sort of pilot plant of mass consumption,” as Rosalind Williams says.<sup>3</sup> The new consumer culture based on mass production initiated “a style of consumption radically different from any previously known.”<sup>4</sup> Replacing bartering, subsistence economy and artisanal craftsmanship, modern consumer culture distanced consumption from production.<sup>5</sup> It made available huge quantities of products and changed consumption practices by introducing new modes of retailing.<sup>6</sup> What was the relationship between the avant-garde painting of Manet and the Impressionists and Parisian consumer culture? Was it merely a cultural, chronological and geographical coincidence, or was there a meaningful link? Did the painting of Manet and the Impressionists criticize or approve of Parisian consumer culture, or was it detached from this crucial aspect of modernity? These were the initial questions that motivated this study. It appeared to me that at a time when nineteenth-century consumer culture was still a new development that stimulated authors such as Zola to write about it extensively, it could not have been simply ignored by the painters of modern life. This book sets out to investigate how the Parisian culture of consumption inspired painters’ choices and interpretations of subjects, what kind of insights their works offered into these subjects and whether and how the modes of address of avant-garde paintings reacted to new modes of address emerging in consumer culture.

The historical context of avant-garde paintings included a visual culture of consumption, a term used here to refer primarily to advertising images, including posters and fashion plates, as well as press illustrations and commodity displays. Parisian consumer culture changed the look of the city with a profusion of advertising signs, posters and the kind of shop-window displays described by Zola. Large signs readable from afar replaced small, picturesque signs.<sup>7</sup> Print media images flooded everyday life in various forms, from illustrated journals that included fashion plates and *réclame* advertising to illustrated department store catalogues and posters visible throughout the city.<sup>8</sup> Thus, avant-garde art during the Impressionist decades was being formed in the midst of radical changes not only in the mode of consumption but also in the visual culture that increasingly permeated modern life, linking it to consumption. This book therefore pays considerable attention to advertising images, particularly posters, which were the rapidly growing mode of large-scale full-color publicity in Paris from the mid-1860s onwards.

Images of fashionable modern women were prominent in the visual culture of consumption. This fact, together with recent findings of cultural history studies on women’s leading role in nineteenth-century consumer culture,<sup>9</sup> led to further questions: What are the implications of the countless paintings of fashionably dressed Parisiennes in the art of Manet and the Impressionists when examined within mid- to late-nineteenth-century cultural discourses on fashion, consumption, and the *chic Parisienne*?

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The art of Manet and the Impressionists has been the subject of a great many scholarly books and exhibitions. Parisian consumer culture is integral to major issues discussed in social and feminist art historical studies of Impressionism, from leisure, capital, spectacle, and the Haussmannization of Paris to spectatorship, class, and gender.<sup>10</sup> Yet none of these has focused primarily on the relationship of Impressionist paintings to Parisian consumer culture. Indebted to revisionist studies on Impressionism, this book aims to contribute to this direction of research in several ways. First, it offers a new perspective by paying close attention to the material culture of modern Parisian consumption, namely, the new regime of advertising and commodity display, situating Impressionist paintings within this visual culture of consumption. Second, reinterpreting certain themes in the oeuvre of Manet and the Impressionists, it seeks to demonstrate that the painters of modernity represented Parisian consumer culture both implicitly and explicitly. Third, reexamining paintings by Manet and the Impressionists in the context of the changing roles of women in the regime of consumer culture, I focus on women's inclusion in modern city life as both consumers and workers. Feminist scholarship has illuminated women's exclusion, objectification, and sexualization but has not yet fully considered the representation of women's inclusion in modernity and modern women's agency as represented in Impressionist painting. This book investigates these issues in two ways – by analyzing works of art that *represent* women's participation in modern life, and by arguing that some of the most interesting Impressionist paintings *address* multiple and diverse viewers, including, most importantly, the female viewer.<sup>11</sup>

Manet and the Impressionists will be shown to depict Parisian consumer culture explicitly and implicitly. Some chapters present explicit themes of consumption, namely, shopping, selling, buying, and the displays of goods on counters, in shop windows and in markets. Others analyze implicit representations such as can be found in numerous Impressionist paintings; a few instances are discussed here. The Impressionists painted numerous scenes of cafés, cafés-concerts, theaters, the Opéra, restaurants and picnics, in all of which consumption plays a central role, whether explicit or implicit.

Historians have broadened the definition of consumer culture beyond shopping to include numerous activities such as reading newspapers, visiting tourist resorts and looking on at fairs.<sup>12</sup> According to this definition, the Impressionists represent consumption in scenes portraying numerous themes, such as reading novels, newspapers, and journals, which might not readily be identified as consumption in the narrower sense. Some paintings emphasize the thematic of consuming also through their mode of address. For example, Renoir's *Young Woman Reading an Illustrated Journal* of c. 1880 shows a woman seated at home, looking at a journal (Fig. 1). The painting not only represents her as a consumer of illustrated journals (and potentially of fashions featured in illustrations, reviews, and fashion plates) but also implies that the spectators of the painting are

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reading/consuming the journal with her. Her back is to the spectators, positioning both her and those viewing the painting as looking at the journal. The representation thus involves the spectator, whether man or woman, in a “participatory” position.

Renoir’s composition calls attention to the journal. It is as much a painting about the commodity, the journal, as about the reader. Yet the artist transforms the illustration into an illegible image. The blurred blue brushstrokes on a white ground form more of an abstracted Impressionist painting vaguely suggesting figures than a representation of a printed page. This introduces an ambiguity into this scene of reading/looking/consuming and mass media/painting. The ambiguities toward the culture of consumption visible in the paintings of Manet and the Impressionists will be explored throughout this book.

This introductory chapter discusses the links among Impressionist painting, Parisian consumer culture and modern women. It begins by showing that nineteenth-century critics perceived a relation between Parisian consumer culture and the art of Manet and the Impressionists. It examines why this link was disavowed by modernist critics, beginning with Zola, and why it has not engendered more discussion in art historical studies. It then discusses the visual culture of consumption, that is, advertising images such as posters and fashion plates, and suggests how avant-garde artists and certain critics regarded such products. It continues by discussing the emerging discourse on women’s spectatorial gazes in the visual culture of consumption as well as in the Impressionist plea to women to take an active role as collectors. Finally, I examine the case of Mary Cassatt, herself an Impressionist artist, whose paintings, I will argue, represent bourgeois women’s participation in modernity’s public space as cultural consumers who are agents in their own display and in their looking, and who negotiate the tensions of their position in public space. The analysis leads to the suggestion that these works by Cassatt position their spectators in a relational mode that prompts multiple viewing positions.

Chapter 2 is an interpretation of Manet’s *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, proposing that it makes Parisian consumer culture explicit by foregrounding a seductive display of glittering goods. The painting participates in, comments on and simulates the encounter with a seductive commodity display of bottles in a bar and the young woman selling drinks. The *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is considered in the context of the changing practices of masculine and feminine gazes in the commodified culture of the late nineteenth century and the metropolitan formation of the modern public/crowd. Suggesting an alternative to the classic feminist model of a masculine gaze and lack of a feminine gaze, I argue that the painting represents a plurality of gazes and that several points of view are inscribed in it. This representation of the diverse gazes of men, women and a crowd at a site of consumption is analyzed as part of a shift related to a culture of mass consumption.

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1. Auguste Renoir, *Young Woman Reading an Illustrated Journal*, c. 1880. 46.35 × 55.88, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Museum Appropriation, Photo, Cathy Carver.

Chapter 3 reinterprets Degas's relatively little-studied works on the theme of millinery, proposing that they portray the Parisian culture of consumption, highlighting commodity display and women consumers and workers. Situating Degas's representations of millinery boutiques and ateliers within a visual culture, including photographs, illustrations and advertising posters, the chapter presents close readings of Degas's works spanning some three decades. Distinctions are made here between images that focus on the display of decorated hats, those that focus on women consumers attended by saleswomen and those that focus primarily on the modistes at work. Different sites of consumption, from boutiques to an elite designer salon and an alcove in a department store, are distinguished. The chapter investigates the different gazes of modern women at sites of consumption as artisans and consumers and contextualizes these within

contemporary discourses in novels, medical treatises and art criticism. It goes on to consider the upper-class bourgeois flâneur's gaze of men such as Manet and Degas, considering their practices and representations of women's fashionable consumption. Finally, I analyze the changes in Degas's representation of the culture of consumption from his early works in the 1880s to the 1890s and early 1900s, showing that his late work, although quite different, is nonetheless haunted by the culture of consumption.

Chapter 4 argues that, contrary to Claude Lantier's overt oppositional act, the strategy of the Impressionists in representing the consumer culture of Parisian boulevards and streets was inconspicuous subversion. I examine the implicit and explicit representations of consumer culture through city views by Manet, Monet, Pissarro, Caillebotte, Renoir, Degas, de Nittis and a contemporary poster. Situating the paintings in the context of late-nineteenth-century discourses on advertising signs and the artificial lighting of shop windows, the chapter analyzes Manet's and the Impressionists' subtle subversion of consumer culture through the ways in which they represent wall advertising, posters, gold-lettered signs, shop fronts, shop signs and shop windows.

Chapter 5 presents three different principal modernist responses to Parisian consumer culture by analyzing representations of urban and village markets. I begin by returning to the fictional painter Claude Lantier in Zola's *Le ventre de Paris*. Lantier is an avant-garde artist obsessed with the central Parisian market, unable to represent it in his paintings, who stages a revolt against consumer culture with its own "materials," namely, its commodities. An analysis of Camille Pissarro's village markets follows, showing that they present an alternative to Parisian consumption, as well as of his kitchen gardens, cultivated plots, which are related to the market. Caillebotte's upscale urban market displays and suburban kitchen gardens are then discussed, and the chapter concludes with Manet's proposal to depict the commercial life of Paris on the walls of the Hôtel des Ville.

Chapter 6 focuses on the theme of the fashionable Parisian woman, which is ubiquitous in the art of Manet and the Impressionists. I present paintings and mass media images of the fashionable woman within the discourse on the bourgeois *chic Parisienne* whose markers are fashionability and taste. The chapter examines representations of the *chic Parisienne* by avant-garde painters, including Monet, Manet, Renoir, Cassatt and Morisot; in mass media images (fashion plates, illustrations of sales catalogues, photographs and posters by Chéret and Choubrac); and in the monumental sculpture *La Parisienne* of the 1900 World Exposition in Paris. This chapter extends the discussion of commodity culture and feminine identities into the domain of the nation, probing the intricate ties between the icons and discourses of the *chic Parisienne* and the national and international consumption of the French fashion industry. It proposes that images of the Parisienne in both avant-garde art and popular culture played a key role in constituting a nexus between femininity and modernity, and between national and gender identity. By extending the discussion to the 1900 monument of *La Parisienne* at the Exposition,



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I attempt to demonstrate the extent to which the *chic Parisienne* became a brand that promoted the French fashion industry and supported French colonial ambitions and claims of international superiority.

### IMPRESSIONIST PAINTING AND PARISIAN CONSUMER CULTURE

This book investigates consumer culture as an important context for Impressionist painting, because, as Michael Miller has demonstrated, at the time “bourgeois culture was coming more and more to mean a consumer culture.”<sup>13</sup> Writing the history of the Bon Marché department store, Miller described the role of the department store as shaping the values of the middle class in the course of revolutionizing the retail system. Mass consumption, which went hand in hand with the mass production of the Industrial Revolution, was based on selling high volumes of goods at predetermined low prices. This new retail system depended on marketing and promotion, including seductive displays and an emerging field of advertising in which images played a major role. Although the department store evolved gradually, by the mid- to late 1860s when Monet painted *Women in the Garden* (Fig. 2), which represents women displaying their fashionable outfits, the sales volume of the average department store in Paris was ten million to twelve million francs a year.<sup>14</sup> In 1877, a few years after the Impressionists held their first exhibition, the Bon Marché, by now housed in a gigantic and palatial building, attained a sales volume of seventy-three million francs and had 1,788 employees.<sup>15</sup> As Miller shows, the department store sold consumption as a way of life, and shopping became an urban leisure activity for middle-class women. J. K. Huysmans’s review of the 1880 exhibition of the Impressionists, which declared with enthusiasm that all the themes of modern life are yet to be painted, does not specify the department store among the numerous possible topics, although the list does include shops and markets.<sup>16</sup> In the following years, during the early 1880s, Degas and Caillebotte took up the themes of urban shops and markets, explicitly representing Parisian consumer culture. Thus, although the Impressionists did not actually portray the enormous buildings or the luxurious interiors of department stores, some of their work explicitly depicts the environment and activities of consumption. Furthermore, the implicit presence of Parisian consumer culture was imprinted on their oeuvre.

Seminal texts by Meyer Schapiro and Walter Benjamin published in the late 1930s evoke this implicit but pervasive presence of Parisian consumer culture in the art of Manet and the Impressionists. In his discussions of Impressionism in “The Nature of Abstract Art,” Schapiro suggests that the point of view of the Impressionist artist is that of “the casual or mobile spectator.”<sup>17</sup> The spectator implied in impressionism is the “urban promenader,” the “cultivated rentier,” and the “refined consumer of luxury goods.” Schapiro makes a connection between

the “mobility of the environment, the market and of industry” and the “cultivated rentier,” who “owes his income and his freedom” to them.<sup>18</sup> Finally, he points out the relationship between the Impressionist vision and techniques and the “conditions of sensibility” of the “refined consumer of luxury goods.”<sup>19</sup>

Walter Benjamin’s ideas about the connection between the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and the city of Paris also help us understand the implicit representation of Parisian consumption in Impressionist painting. As Benjamin states, “Baudelaire describes neither the Parisians nor their city” directly, yet “the secret presence of the crowd is demonstrable almost everywhere.”<sup>20</sup> He explains this by observing that “The masses had become so much a part of Baudelaire that it is rare to find a description of them in his works.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than being represented directly, the masses are the paradigm for Baudelaire’s poetry. In Benjamin’s words, “The mass was the agitated veil; through it Baudelaire saw Paris.”<sup>22</sup> The mass did not serve as his model but it was “imprinted on his creativity as a hidden figure.”<sup>23</sup> Benjamin’s insights about Baudelaire’s poetry and Paris are instructive in considering the relationship between Impressionist painting and Parisian consumer culture.<sup>24</sup> The latter mediates the Impressionists’ vision of modern life even when it is not explicitly portrayed.

Although the relationship between Parisian consumer culture and the art of Manet and the Impressionists was disavowed by modernist critics, beginning with Zola, some late-nineteenth-century critics and caricaturists observed the existence of this relationship and objected to it vehemently or satirized it. Twentieth-century modernist scholarship has presented such critics’ negative reviews of the art of Manet and the Impressionists primarily as proof of hostile reception and inability to understand the formal innovations of avant-garde art.<sup>25</sup> In what follows, some examples of these reviews, together with caricatures, are discussed for a different purpose, namely, as evidence for the fact that the initial reception of the work of Manet and the Impressionists in nineteenth-century Paris was replete with the perception that paintings of modern life and cheap signs of consumer culture were all too closely connected.

In commenting on the paintings as soon as they were exhibited, certain caricaturists satirized what they considered to be a symbiosis between consumer culture and avant-garde painting. Bertall, for example, associated Manet’s *The Balcony*, exhibited in the Salon of 1869, with a cheap consumer display: “The Ten Cent Store. Everything is ten cents. Just look! The dolls, the toy dogs, the ball-rooms, the flower-pots, and everything else. . . .”<sup>26</sup> An 1879 caricature by Draner in *Le Charivari* shows how a contemporary Parisian observer saw signs of advertising and department store accessories in Degas’s *Café Singer* (Figs. 3 and 4).<sup>27</sup> The caricature highlights the singer’s black glove and the text below declares that the woman’s open mouth is shouting: “A bargain at seven and a half francs a pair! Eight buttons! What a great sign for a place that sells gloves!”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the caricature makes this apparent café-concert singer into a saleswoman in an advertisement soliciting the passersby.<sup>29</sup> The caricature also vulgarizes the woman by exchanging



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2. Claude Monet, *Women in the Garden*, 1866–67, 255 × 205. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. © Photo RMN/© all rights reserved.

the fur-trimmed pink dress that covers much of her upper body and arm for a strapless dress emphasizing the breasts and bare upper chest and arm. In other words, what struck an observer in 1879 as controversial about Degas's pastel was not merely its portrayal of a singer at a café-concert, a subject from the sphere of popular commercial entertainment, but, even more so, its blunt presentation of a theme linked to selling feminine fashions and accessories in department stores.

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3. Edgar Degas, *Café Singer (Singer with a Glove)*, c. 1878. Pastel on canvas, 52.9 × 41.1. The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, MA. Bequest from the Collection of Maurice Wertheim, Class of 1906, 1951.68, Photographic Services. Image © 2004 President and Fellows of Harvard College.

By turning the singer into a sexualized saleswoman, the caricaturist makes the implicit theme of consumption explicit. The caricature reveals that the prominently displayed glove was seen as a disruptive sign of the invasion of consumerism into high art.