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**Ruth E. Iskin**, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xiv + 283 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-84080-4.

Review by Hollis Clayson, Northwestern University.

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Ruth Iskin's engaging book, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*, based on her 1997 U.C.L.A. art history Ph.D. dissertation, arrives in a congested and influential subfield of art history. Numerous prior scholars have endeavored to pinpoint and explain the manifold connections between later nineteenth-century vanguard painting (especially the work of Édouard Manet and the Impressionists *qua* "The Painting of Modern Life" [1]), on one hand, and the signature socio-economic practices and gender identities of modern Parisians, on the other.[2] What are the links between modernism and modernity? Do Impressionist paintings ironize, celebrate, refuse, embrace, negate, idealize, subvert, parody or merely describe their Parisian subject matter? In light of the formidable analytical energy directed at the complexities of the imbeddedness of "The New Painting" (using Edmond Duranty's term this time [3]) in the material fabric and socio-economic life and structures of "The Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (Walter Benjamin's turn [4]), the key question about the book is this: what novel angle or new "facts" does Iskin bring to bear upon terrain that has been so well-tilled by earlier historians of French art and culture? That fundamental question is tackled in what follows. What matters most, in the end, is that the book will change the way one thinks about the pictures discussed.

Iskin's motivation was her predecessors' ignorance and neglect of what her research brought to light: the broad scope of the "relationship" between "consumer culture" and vanguard painting. Her investigation of that link entailed the pursuit of three goals: 1) to situate Impressionist paintings within the "material culture of modern Parisian consumption, namely, the new regime of advertising and commodity display;" 2) "to demonstrate that the painters of modernity represented Parisian consumer culture both implicitly and explicitly;" and 3) to observe that Impressionist painting represents "women's inclusion in modernity and modern women's agency" (p. 3). Thus Iskin, who teaches art history and visual culture at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel, moves forward on two conjoined battle fronts: that of consumer culture and female agency.

The book's credibility depends upon the crystal-clear definition of "relationship" and "consumer culture," referenced in the first sentence of the prior paragraph. The volume's integrity also rests upon the marshalling of a lucid argument about the telltale and newly understood affiliation between vanguard painting and the constantly-enunciated "consumer culture." As in the open-ended conceptualization of "inspiration" used in a major thesis statement in the book's introduction — "This book sets out to investigate how the Parisian culture of consumption inspired painters' choices and interpretations of subjects" (p. 2) — the recurrent reluctance of

the author to define these and other key terms, and frequent disinclination to delineate unambiguously the purported linkages between them — leave the reader frustrated.[5]

Chapter one lays out the book's terms, adumbrates its coverage and arguments, and initiates its steady stream of fascinating new information about Parisian advertising and commerce. "Consumer culture" as such, however, is defined neither here nor elsewhere in the book, at least not to this reader's satisfaction. Iskin writes, "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." (p. 3) This generalization thwarts the historian's interest in the historicity of the dynamic consumer cultures of modern Paris and leaves out altogether the big issues of class and geography these problems become even more vexing as the book goes along. A trying case in point is a fourteen-line paragraph that tautologically rehearses the phrase "consumer culture" three times without specification or details (p. 97). In these early twenty-first-century days of the dominion of manipulated consumer greed, being clear about the historicity of the links between female agency and consumption is urgent lest we mistakenly assume that the interpellation of women citizens exclusively as "shopping subjects" has been a constant in the Atlantic world for more than 125 years.

Chapter two, which appeared as an article in *The Art Bulletin* in 1995, focuses exclusively upon Manet's 1882 *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (*BFB*). Iskin argues that "it makes Parisian consumer culture explicit by foregrounding a seductive display of glittering goods" (p. 4). Departing from the orthodox feminist reading, Iskin argues that the picture represents a plurality of gazes at a site of consumption which she in turn connects to "a shift related to a culture of mass consumption" (p. 4). Along with the bottles on the bar, the famous centrally-placed barmaid is a hub of the account, since "Associating goods with a beautiful woman and using both to lure spectators became a common strategy in the evolving advertising culture of mass consumption, and it is in this context that Manet's *BFB* is best understood" (p. 41). Iskin leans hard upon the analogy between the contents and staging of the painted image, on the one hand, and period advertising, on the other, stating that "The painting itself reveals Manet's identification of his art with products for sale" (p. 41). The mass cultural materials adduced in this chapter are intriguing, and succeed very well in building a visual cultural context for Manet's oil painting. One nonetheless feels let down by the overview of connections drawn between this vanguard painting and its apposite sector of the consumer culture. Iskin writes, "If we ask whether the *BFB* was critical of mass consumption, was complicit with it, or even celebrated it, an argument could be made in favor of each of these possibilities, though it would be misleading to cast the debate in such "either/or" terms. Avant-garde painting was both immersed in the contemporaneous scene of mass consumption and an agent in it" (p. 58). The open-endedness of this appraisal renders it both puzzling and unhelpful.

Chapter three, a study of millinery pictures made by Edgar Degas between 1882 and ca. 1910, observes that he was the only Impressionist who "portrayed a specifically feminine world of fashion consumption" (p. 60) literally set in shops. Iskin further refines their thematic purview by calling them explicit representations of "Parisian fashion consumption" linked to the Parisian fashion industry (pp. 60-61). The theme and intimate settings of the works are tailor-made for Iskin's interest in the conjunction of shopping and the staging of female agency. Indeed, she proceeds to point out helpfully that "not one of Degas's works on the *modiste* or hat shop

includes a would-be masculine client eyeing the *modistes* or the hats in the window" (p. 69), which leads her to argue convincingly that the longings represented are "bourgeois women's desires for fashionable hats" (p. 70). Another major observation is that Degas departs in this series from the "earlier Impressionists' Baudelaire-inspired paradigm, which presents woman and their fashionable outfits as 'an indivisible unity'" (pp. 81-82). Also persuasive was her claim that the works demonstrate that "Degas perceived some common ground between the gaze of the higher-level artisan *modiste* looking at her creative work and the gaze of a bourgeois woman consumer at a fashionable hat" (p. 76), and her irrefutable observation that Degas was more interested in representing the display of hats than any of his colleagues (p. 96). One of her most original points falls within the discussion of Degas' ostensible institutional referents. Iskin proposes that a number of the works were set in or adjoining large modern spaces: either the alcove of a department store (p. 89) or the spacious environment of an haute-couture salon. If such up-to-date female haberdasheries were indeed Degas's frames of reference, then the whole series is much less anachronistic than it has seemed hitherto.[6]

Chapter four, "Inconspicuous Subversion," tracks the bric-a-brac of "the Parisian culture of consumption, such as storefronts, shop signs, shop displays, and various advertisements" (p. 115) in Impressionist city views of the 1870s, unnoticed heretofore or not prioritized by other scholars. Despite the use (and promise) of "subversion" in the chapter title, the promising sleuthing enterprise is launched within a dispiritingly bland conceptual framework: "The visibility of consumer culture in the city and in the media, along with other developments of modernity, constitute the context within which Manet and the Impressionists depicted streets and boulevards during the 1870s" (p. 114). Various details flagged and identified by Iskin are certainly worthwhile *trouvailles*. This reader's favorite was the discovery of *sur mesure* ("made to measure"), a presumably ironic squib on the wall sign (probably taken from an ad for La Belle Jardinière department store) at the left edge of Manet's *Rue Mosnier with Pavés*, 1878. It is also eye-opening and helpful to learn that "in 1878, when Manet included a painted advertisement in his Rue Mosnier paintings, there were some 1,064 of them in the Département de la Seine" (p. 134). But do these plot discoveries constitute new knowledge of the paintings? The author's answer is tepid: "[the artists] represent both explicit and implicit signs of Parisian consumer culture in their city views of the 1870s, expressing a modernist ambivalence about consumer culture and its representation in art" (p. 115); "These various strategies embody resistance without resort to moralizing descriptions; they perform inconspicuous subversions that avoid a heroic stance" (p. 132); and "Modernist painters insisted on the ubiquitous presence of the material signs of the culture of consumption, yet kept them at a distance" (p. 147). This is the kind of ambivalent interpretation that allows the art historian to have her cake and eat it too. Is Iskin arguing that the modernist city view resembles Bakhtin's novel, "living purely in its dialogic relation to other [visual] modes, cannibalizing and parodying them"?[7] Or rather that the mere presence of a commercial detail, mode of representation notwithstanding, indexes a subversive repudiation of the world of commerce?

Another sort of methodological problem occurs when the discovery of an advertising sign managed somehow to block an awareness of the semiotic importance of other critical elements and events in a painting. For example, highlighting the undeniable prominence of the five gold letters of an incomplete advertising sign on the facing building seen through the French doors of Gustave Caillebotte's 1880 *Interior* (fig. 53) apparently discouraged the author from pursuing the significance of the flash

point of the painting's mise-en-scène: the inquisitive female subject's concentration upon the exposed triangle of a neighbor's curtained apartment window, directly below the alphabetic avatar of commercial culture.

Chapter five compares representations of the marketplace by Émile Zola, Camille Pissarro's kitchen gardens and market scenes, and Caillebotte's kitchen garden and consumer display paintings. Final remarks are reserved for Manet's unrealized proposal (to have been called, in thrall to Zola, *Le Ventre de Paris*) in 1879 to decorate the new Hôtel de Ville. The great strength of this successful chapter is its juxtaposition of diverse representations of thematically linked material, some quite thought-provoking. For example, discussing the prominent laboring woman in Pissarro's 1883 *The Pork Butcher (La Charcutière)* in light of the artist's recent encounter of the female bartender of Manet's *BFB* (shown in the Salon of 1882), is a discovery and analysis of an instance of genuine intertextuality that makes us see Pissarro's work in a new light. Likewise, the contrasts drawn between Caillebotte's metropolitan foodstuff displays ("supermerchandise") and Pissarro's village markets are worthwhile and persuasive. Iskin argues that Caillebotte's highly original representations of "goods on the market can be taken as a critique of Parisian consumer culture" (p. 177). The chapter's valedictory discussion of Manet's ironic proposal is excellent. Iskin concludes that "it defied Zola's verdict about the failure of the modernist artist to depict contemporary commercial life; his proposal asserted that a modernist artist such as himself *could* represent Paris as a modern market." (p. 181)

The final section, chapter six, "The Chic Parisienne," examines the commercial and national valences of the rise of la Parisienne, a mythic figure of contemporary Parisian female chic, to prominence in advertising culture and modernist painting during the second half of the 1800s, as well as its sculptural apotheosis at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition. The discussion of the colonial hauteur and superiority of the colossal Parisienne dressed by Jeanne Paquin is especially good. The chapter is informed throughout by the claim that her ascent demonstrates "her function as a stereotype of French fashion and femininity that supported both the consumer economy and a French identity of cultural superiority (p. 185)." She thus became a national symbol and trademark of the French fashion industry. The spread of the love affair with the Parisienne to the canvases of the Impressionist modernists (save Pissarro) has always been extremely difficult to explain. Iskin argues that the artists could not have cornered modernity without recourse to the leading emblem of "French metropolitan femininity defined by Parisian fashion" (p. 198). She reads their interest as a sign of an across-the-board wish to emulate "the repeated media appearances of this "type"" (p. 202). This is not entirely satisfactory as a general proposition, but an argument with edge and originality unfolds when attention focuses upon Manet's 1881 *Spring* (fig. 88); the account provides a nuanced sense of what would draw an artist like Manet to this particular female type. *Spring* is read as "a picture of feminine agency under the rule of spectacle;" a "mixture of tough urban femininity, coquettish but aloof and self-assured, a comportment communicating control along with an exquisitely stylish toilette [which pushes] the limits of the rules of etiquette governing women in public social spaces" (p. 214) One might have wished, however, that this assignment of female independence to Manet's image of his friend Jeanne Demarsy as the chic Parisienne (and thus "the typical woman of the Third Republic" (p. 223)) might have shaped the book's discussion of this bellwether figure of Parisian femininity in the realm of the boulevard press (the domain of caricature), where her ideological function often exceeds the boundaries of the "commercial functions" (p. 185) that Iskin assigns to print culture. Often shown in

caricature to outfox and differ from the women of the social mainstream, la Parisienne (in cartooned and caricatured form) functioned paradoxically as both a marker of female *débrouillardise* and a critical guarantor of stability. Her resourcefulness and variability fortified or protected the constancy of the social order from which she of course differed (in caricature she was typically a super-clever petite bourgeoisie) and vis-à-vis which she maintained her tactical superiority. In light of this, Iskin's gloss on what drove women of modest means to become Parisiennes (see p. 193) seems limited because exceedingly instrumental.

This extremely rich book is brimming with new social and cultural information. A review of this length cannot do justice to its interpretive moves — which range from the limited and frustrating to the complex and extremely convincing. Despite the occasional doubts expressed in this review, Iskin's book is required reading for specialists in nineteenth-century Parisian visual culture.

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## NOTES

[1] In the spirit, and using the nomenclature, of Charles Baudelaire's influential and constantly-referenced 1863 essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" ("Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne"), *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P.E. Charvet (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 395-422.

[2] The book's extensive citations call attention to the immense quantity of pre-Iskin titles. There are indeed dozens of art historians who have conducted their work under the elastic banner, "the social history of Impressionism," especially since the 1980s. Two names stand out in Iskin's endnotes and in the history of Impressionism itself: T. J. Clark and Robert L. Herbert. Clark's study, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the art of Manet and his followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), and Herbert's book, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), remain subfield touchstones. Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock deserve essential credit for inaugurating and advancing feminist work in this subfield of art history, and for galvanizing many followers. To cite only their earliest work: Linda Nochlin and Thomas B. Hess, eds., *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730-1970* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), and Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982). Nochlin and Pollock originated the historiography, now densely populated, that begot Iskin's interest in female agency.

[3] Louis Emile Edmond Duranty, "La nouvelle peinture" [1876], reproduced in full in Charles S. Moffett et al., *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886*, an exhibition organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco with the National Gallery of Art (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1986), pp. 477-484.

[4] Walter Benjamin, "Paris – The Capital of the Nineteenth Century" [the 1935 exposé], *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973), pp. 155-176. This essay, which also exists in a 1939 version was to serve as the foundation of the incomplete arcades project. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belnap Press of Harvard University, 1999).

[5] That none of the book's ninety-two illustrations is in color (with the exception of the stunning 1882 Degas pastel on the dust jacket) is likewise disappointing. And the frequent grayness and graininess of the black and white reproductions of very subtle, largely middle-tone paintings make it difficult to follow arguments that depend upon specific, tiny details. Overall, Cambridge University Press did not do Iskin any favors in the sphere of production values. As Griselda Pollock pointed out memorably (in "Don't Take the Pissarro: But Take the Monet and Run! Or Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1991), pp. 96-103), fabulous paper and art reproduction quality are not secure markers of art historical excellence, but careful proofreading is always preferred. It is a real pity therefore that Iskin's text is riddled with typos, in both English (e.g., "emphathizes," p. 138; and "*The Maserpiece*," p. 241) and French (e.g., "une bonne eitiquette," p. 20; "invisible fâneuse," p. 95; a particularly tangled plural: "nom de plums" p. 102; and "Erangy" p. 155). And, for the record, there are several errors of fact. Manet and Degas did not serve together in the artillery during the Franco-Prussian War (p. 99), the Boulevard des Capucines (cf. Monet's paintings), part of the old *grands boulevards* network, is not a Haussmann era thoroughfare (p. 143), and the ship of Paris is not the emblem of the Republic (p. 218).

[6] Compare my discussion of Degas's and other period artists' work on this theme in *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven and London, 1991), pp. 121-132. A recent essay sets a new standard of excellence in the analysis of female fashion and/in male modernist painting: André Dombrowski, "The emperor's last clothes: Cézanne, fashion and 'l'année terrible'," *The Burlington Magazine*, CXLVIII (September 2006), pp. 586-594.

[7] Terry Eagleton, "I Contain Multitudes," review of Graham Pechey, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Word in the World* (London: Routledge, 2007), *London Review of Books* (21 June 2007), p. 15.

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See also [Ruth E. Iskin's Response](#) to this review.