

Tel qu'il est aujourd'hui, l'art reste par règle supérieure conforme à sa mission; il exprime actuellement le manque d'unité, l'inquiétude morale, l'état de trouble enfin, communs à toutes les époques de transition, et qui dominent son milieu et son temps. Cela, il l'exprime pleinement et sans réserves, et on ne peut lui demander davantage. ~Ch. Genuys (*Revue des Arts Décoratifs, 1894-1895*)¹

Born of the turmoil immediately following France's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Germans in 1871, the Third Republic was desperate to assert itself as a competent governing body amid constant crisis as the century turned. The scandal over the collapse of French involvement in the construction of the Panama Canal in 1892 occurred at a time when the government felt itself increasingly threatened by anarchists' bombs and social unrest at home. In 1898 the Dreyfus Affair, involving the wrongful accusation of a Jewish army official for treason, split the nation further and led the politically active author Emile Zola to note in his journal, "Is there something rotten in France?"² If art, according to Genuys, is a reflection of its time, then we have only to turn to the work of his contemporaries for insight into this deeply troubled period of transformation. The feminine interiors in paintings by both Edouard Vuillard and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec reveal the prominent place of women in the political discourse of the Third Republic. The bourgeois woman had an important role to fulfill as the purveyor of the home and the mother of upright French citizens at a time when the birthrate was declining precipitously. Her female counterpart, the prostitute, came to play an equally essential role in indirectly maintaining the middle class family unit by serving as the receptacle for dangerous male lust. But as the 19th century turned into the 20th, the process of containment on which this system depended became increasingly difficult to maintain due to the appropriation of social signifiers by classes to which they did not belong. (The style associated with a prostitute's couch might appear, for instance, in the home of an independent bourgeois woman; and the wallpaper of a bourgeois woman's bedroom might decorate the site of a casual sexual encounter). The firm boundaries between the domestic interiors painted by Vuillard and the brothels depicted by Toulouse-Lautrec began to rupture, and clear definitions of the bourgeois woman and the prostitute were no longer possible. Social changes that led to the rise of a more independent bourgeois woman (absent from the works of Vuillard and Toulouse-Lautrec) further complicated the question of feminine social identity. The perceived social threat caused by this displacement was not only evident in the turmoil internal to France, but was mirrored in the rising political tension between France and Germany that would shake the world in 1914.

Edouard Vuillard, the artist known for his paintings of women in domestic spaces, was born into a petit bourgeois family on November 11, 1868 in the provincial town of Cuiseaux some 300 miles from Paris. The son of a retired army captain and tax collector, Joseph-Honoré Vuillard, Edouard was the youngest of three children. His mother and his sister Marie would

¹ "Art today remains true to its mission ; it currently expresses the lack of unity, the moral disquiet, the state of trouble, common to all ages of transition and which dominate the milieu and the age. This it expresses plainly and without reservation, and we cannot ask more of it." Charles Genuys, "La Recherche du Style Nouveau," In *La Revue des Arts Décoratifs, 1894-1895*. (Bordeaux: Imprimerie G. Gounouilhou, 1895), 355.

² Eugen Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 121.

figure prominently in many of his works. When Vuillard was nine years old, his family moved to Paris where he became a student at the Catholic École Rocroy. Several years later Vuillard's father died, leaving his wife to support the family by establishing a corset and dress-making atelier in their apartment on the rue du Marché-Saint-Honoré. From an early age, the young Vuillard was surrounded by patterned textiles and the feminine world of dress-making, themes which would greatly influence his later painting. The timid Vuillard never married and instead lived faithfully with his mother, whom he called "my muse," until her death in 1928. Vuillard's devotion to his mother and sister, and his presence as a child in their atelier, lent a psychological intimacy to his later paintings of women in such spaces.

In 1884 Vuillard enrolled at the prestigious Lycée Condorcet where he met Maurice Denis, Aurelien Lugné-Poe, Thadée Natanson, and Ker-Xavier Roussel, all of whom would play important roles in the theater and art worlds of turn-of-the-century Paris. Many would become Vuillard's close friends and colleagues in the development of a decorative painting style that used art in the service of interior design. After being denied entrance twice to the École des Beaux Arts, Vuillard enrolled in the Académie Julian, until he was finally admitted to the École in 1887, where he studied with the famous French history painter Jean-Léon Gérôme. But his stay was short-lived and in 1888 he returned to the Académie Julian, painting side by side with Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, Henri-Gabriel Ibels, René Piot Pierre Bonnard, and the older symbolist painter Paul Sérusier. That year the artists formed a circle to protest the conservative curriculum of the school and in 1889, encouraged by Sérusier, the group gave itself the name of "Nabi" (Hebrew for "prophet").³

It is as difficult now as it was then to describe precisely what the Nabis stood for. Upon seeing their eclectic artwork at the 1899 exhibit of the 'Modern School,' one critic declared: "In front of these one doesn't understand the tie that unites them, unless it is a serious friendship."⁴ While the work of the individual Nabis varied greatly, their oeuvre is indicative of a larger movement at the end of the 19th century that redefined art in terms of interiority (both physical and psychological). To begin, the Nabis unanimously rejected small-scale easel painting as "nothing but an illogical refinement invented to satisfy the fantasy or the commercial spirit in decadent civilizations."⁵ The Nabis disavowed the capitalism inherent to the dealer system and instead produced an art intended for the private homes of their bourgeois patrons: "The work of the painter begins where that of the architect is finished. Hence let us have walls, that we may paint them over...There are no paintings, but only decorations."⁶ These young artists saw themselves as *peintres-décorateurs* whose paintings were decorative objects in interior spaces meant to serve as a retreat from the outside world. Vuillard himself perhaps best expressed the psychological goals of the Nabis' paintings when he wrote in his diary in 1890, "Nothing is

³ The Nabi group was composed of Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Paul Sérusier, Henri Ibels, Ker-Xavier Roussel, the theater director Aurélien Lugné Poe, the sculptor Georges Lacombe, Armand Seguin, the musician Pierre Hermant, Percheron, René Piot, the sculptor Aristide Maillol, Jan Verkade, and Félix Valloton.

⁴ André Fontainas, qtd. in Gloria Groom, *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890-1930*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 32.

⁵ Georges Albert Aurier, qtd. in Groom, *Beyond the Easel*, 18.

⁶ Jan Verkade, qtd. in Groom, *Beyond the Easel*, 1.

important save the spiritual state that enables one to subjectify one's thought to a sensation."⁷ Drawing heavily on the symbolist aesthetic, this evocation of an emotional state of sensory impression through paint was another aspect of art's retreat away from the material world of the public sphere and into the tranquility of the decorative (often feminized) interior.

Vuillard's series of four panels commissioned by the renowned French heart doctor Louis-Henri Vazquez in 1896 is characteristic of the artist's frequent depiction of women in interiors. The works were intended for the library of the doctor's apartment on the avenue General-Foy in the ninth arrondissement.⁸ Vazquez's art collection included works by Toulouse-Lautrec, Rodin, Carrière, Renoir, Degas, and Redon, no doubt acquired in exchange for his medical services. These services, which included treatment associated with the newly discovered neurasthenia, brought him into contact with the "fashionable set" of Paris in the years before the turn of the century.⁹ The panels depicting bourgeois women engaged in numerous domestic activities—playing the piano, singing, reading, or sewing—attest to this conjunction in Vuillard's oeuvre between a feminized bourgeois interior and the emergent interest in the psychological interiority of the individual in the last decades of the 19th century.

One of the two large panels in the set, *Le Piano*, measures approximately six feet by six feet and portrays four women variously engaged in playing the piano, reclining on a couch, and sewing a swath of richly detailed fabric—each entirely absorbed in her respective activity. The viewer is immediately struck by the incredible array of patterns in the picture. A series of rigidly parallel horizontal lines echoing the bottom edge of the canvas (the striped table to the right, the side of the piano, the books atop the piano which appear as lines of pure color, and the grid above the wallpaper) alternates with the sinuous, organic design on the wall that merges with the actual bouquet of flowers above the sewing woman's head. The viewer's eye follows this series of muddled lines and winding tendrils until it reaches the top of the canvas; no access to the space of the painting has been granted. Instead, the eye remains on the surface and floats to the top of the panel, where the patterned wallpaper is firmly bisected by a horizontal line. Yet even here, no entry (or exit) is permitted—the grid of green lines locks the viewer into the space as surely as prison bars, the verticals sending the eye downward again to contend with the women and the objects surrounding (and obscuring) them. The logical recession of the three-dimensional space of the picture is immediately compromised by the flatness effected by the raised floor from which pillows seem to spring and by the overwhelming number of patterns that draw attention to the surface of the painting, as though it were a tapestry of interwoven threads. To suggest that the human figures in the panel look like cut-outs pasted onto a painted background would imply a clearly defined boundary between foreground and background. Instead, the subjects appear as mere extensions of their physical surroundings. Their blurred contours bleed into the scenery in places; the sewing woman's head is easily confused with the vase holding the bouquet of white

⁷ Edouard Vuillard, qtd. in Guy Cogeval, *Vuillard: Post-Impressionist Master*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002), 19.

⁸ Gloria Groom, *Edouard Vuillard, Painter-Decorator: Patrons and Projects, 1892-1912*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 90.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

flowers. Her companions are depicted in the same manner, as shapes and forms hardly different from the objects surrounding them. The piano player's head threatens to be consumed by the shadowy purple of her dress, and the two women on the sofa behind her might easily be a partial extension of her puffed sleeve. They resemble two tiny dolls, puppets perhaps, inexplicably dark and diminished relative to their environment.

The tenuous relationship between object and self in this work, the deliberate avoidance of “a subject that's objectively too precise [and] could easily become unbearable,”¹⁰ had implications beyond the edges of the painting. The close association of women with objects was not a new theme in literature or art, but it took on new meaning in the last decades of the 19th century. Leora Auslander has shown how wives were assets as important to the upright bourgeois home as the furniture that was purchased in strict accordance with norms of aesthetic respectability. In his novel *Son excellence Eugène Rougon*, Zola implies that the title character's wife is herself the finishing touch on their newly decorous abode:

Mme Rougon, in three months, had brought a sober atmosphere to the house in the rue Marbeuf, where a licentious mood had dominated before...Rougon smiled when complimented on his home...His wife delighted him; he had wanted a bourgeois interior for a long time, an interior that would be material proof of his honesty. That was all that was needed to separate him completely from his dubious past....¹¹

In his survey of Salon paintings in the 1890s, the art critic Camille Mauclair expressed his concern for the ways these boundaries between feminized subject and artful object were changing:

A beautiful woman...was purely physical....A feminine portrait was hence always a decorative work...a stylized landscape of which the woman's body, invisible and central, was the driving force and the prisoner of the whole ensemble...Yet a new concept of women's portraits has begun to emerge. Her decorative and nonconscious aspects will probably fade.¹²

The anxiety expressed concerning the changing role of women in the latter part of the statement is unmistakable. The beautiful, mindless, and artistically-satisfying woman of the past was fast losing ground to a new and threatening type of bourgeois woman—the free-thinking, better-educated *femme nouvelle*. She rode bicycles, attended feminist conventions, forsook her family to pursue personal and professional ambitions, and most importantly, she threatened the sanctity of the bourgeois home at a time when the French birthrate was rapidly declining. Something had to be done.

¹⁰ Edouard Vuillard, qtd. in Groom, *Edouard Vuillard, Painter-Decorator*, 58.

¹¹ Emile Zola, qtd. in Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 290.

¹² Camille Mauclair, qtd. in Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 69.

The obvious apprehension surrounding the changing role of women and the introduction of these new “types” was part of the broader landscape of the political and economic tensions of capitalism, which grew progressively tenser after 1889. That year marked the centennial anniversary of the French Revolution—the great symbol of republican values triumphant. After France’s defeat by the Prussians in 1871, the universal exhibition planned for 1889 seemed to be the perfect opportunity for the Third Republic to assert itself as the purveyor of the liberal republicanism linked to the nation’s past. The Gallery of Machines and the Eiffel Tower would be the twin symbols of France’s architectural, technological, and industrial prowess. Yet it was soon apparent that French industry was no match for its rapidly proliferating German and American competitors, whose industrial output tripled and quadrupled, respectively, between 1885 and 1895. France’s production improved by only twenty-five percent.¹³ What was worse, international deference to the *goût français*, the “Gallic regime of international consumer elegance,”¹⁴ was threatened by American luxury objects and German crafts produced by French artisans who emigrated after the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in 1870.¹⁵ Alarmed by the internal threat from the *femme nouvelle* and the hostility of the international open market, the Third Republic sought a solution to its troubles through the revitalization of the rococo craft tradition of the previous century.

Far from being eschewed by the political officials who so feared her destructive potential, the bourgeois woman had a prominent and extremely important role to play in this national revival. These “queens...of the interior”¹⁶ were essential for the inculcation of republican values in the children they were expected to produce and raise. Writing in 1896, the senator Jules Simon determined that, “Everything in a woman, her body, her mind, and her character, has been planned by nature’s creator as a preparation for childbearing.”¹⁷ In 1900 a patriotic doctor, agreeing with the assertion of his medical colleagues that “Woman is not a brain, she is a sex,” stated that “for the woman, maternity is the greatest and noblest function; it is so to speak, her whole function.”¹⁸ The significant, if reluctant, political concessions made to women in the last decades of the 19th century (the right to divorce in 1884, the right to independently open a saving’s account in 1886, the gradual expansion of female secondary education under the Ferry Laws) made it increasingly difficult to argue that motherhood was a woman’s destiny.¹⁹ Instead, it became her duty. Between 1870 and 1914, the birthrate fell by 27.4 percent,²⁰ and French officials were quick to point out that by 1891 the Germans were producing twice as many children as the French.²¹ This troubling domestic problem took on political and military significance. In an article for the *Revue politique et parlementaire*, Dr. Jacques Bertillon wrote,

¹³ Silverman, 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁷ Jules Simon, qtd. in Silverman, 73.

¹⁸ Ludovic O’Followell, qtd. in Weber, 88.

¹⁹ Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990): 213.

²⁰ Weber, 89.

²¹ Silverman, 66.

“It is fatal that Germany will have twice as many conscripts as France in fourteen years.”²² The modest and virtuous bourgeois woman, then, carried the fate of the republic in her belly.

In addition to embodying the ideals of republican motherhood, women were expected to participate in the aristocratic tradition of craft-making in the home. French writer and collector Octave Uzanne recommended that men “choose a young lady who does not despise crocheting, whom tapestry interests, and who loves embroidery.”²³ More importantly, they were entrusted with the construction of an interior space that would serve not just as a “refuge from but a replacement for the external world”²⁴ of the bustling metropolis. The French state was quick to praise a woman’s “innate” ability to decorate the home, suggesting that perhaps she held the key to this quest for a new art that would revive the nation. In 1895, the *Revue des Arts Décoratifs* mused:

« La femme n’est-elle pas l’organisatrice du « home » ? disait Mme Pégard dans le mémoire qu’elle lut au dernier Congrès des Arts décoratifs. N’est-ce pas elle qui préside à l’agencement intérieur, qui choisit ces tentures, ces meubles, ces bronzes, ces porcelaines, ces cristaux, ces pièces d’argenterie, tous ces bibelots, ces mille riens qui donnent l’élégance et du charme au logis, et tous ces objets si nombreux qui concourent à la parure féminine : les tissus, les broderies, les bijoux, les fleurs, etc., etc. ? » C’est donc du choix de la femme...que dépendent les progrès des arts décoratifs.²⁵

Even *le goût féminin* was mobilized in opposition to German and other nations with potentially hostile markets. The same article continued, “Songez qu’il est question de la femme la plus justement réputée pour avoir le goût aiguisé, délicat, de la Parisienne, en un mot, et voyez ce qu’on peut dire des autres, de l’Allemande ou de l’Anglaise!”²⁶ Auslander has argued that the feminine necessity of representing the nation and the self through consumption and construction of the home in the late 19th and early 20th centuries became as important as the earlier imperative of the making of family and class.²⁷

The bourgeois home of the late 19th century was organized in opposition to and as a refuge from the outside (especially the urban) world, whose overcrowded, noisy streets produced

²² Jacques Bertillon, qtd. in Silverman, 66.

²³ Octave Uzanne, qtd in Silverman, 71.

²⁴ Silverman, 77.

²⁵ “Is not the woman the organizer of the “home”?” asked Mme Pégard in the memoir she read at the last Congress of Decorative Arts. ‘Is it not she who presides over the layout of the interior, who chooses tints, furniture, bronzes, porcelains, crystals, pieces of silver, all of the ornaments, the thousand nothings that lend an elegance and charm to the lodgings, and all of these numerous objects that complete the feminine costume: fabrics, embroideries, jewels, flowers, etc, etc?’ It is thus on the choice of women that depends the progress of the decorative arts.” Victor Champier, “Exposition des Arts de la Femme” *La Revue des Arts Décoratifs*, 1894-1895, 322-323.

²⁶ “If you understand that it’s a question of the woman, the most justly famous for the polished, delicate taste of a Parisian, in a word, then you can imagine what could be said of the English and German woman.” Victor Champier, *La Revue des Arts Décoratifs*, 324.

²⁷ Auslander, 278.

a hyper-stimulation of the senses and led to “Nervous Exhaustion” (neurasthenia), with symptoms that included “physical and mental lassitude, listlessness, lack of energy and enthusiasm, and a general sense of weariness.”²⁸ This space of inner tranquility associated with femininity would provide physical and mental calm by blocking out the public, masculine world associated with the exterior. Since it was clearly impossible for the home to be entirely feminine (men did live within its walls, after all), the bourgeoisie became obsessed with delimiting and containing the spaces within the home associated with each sex. Various styles of furniture related to historical epochs and, by extension, to gender were assigned to specific rooms, thereby facilitating this process of classification. Furniture crafted in the style of Louis XIII or Henri II was associated with masculinity and might therefore be used in furnishing a man’s bedroom or his study; Louis XIV and Louis XV furniture were considered androgynous and so could occupy spaces associated with both sexes, like the drawing room or parlor. Finally, women were to decorate their bedrooms and boudoirs in the style of Louis XVI, which was firmly connected to femininity.²⁹ As interior decoration had become, to some extent, a means of self-fashioning and self-projection by the late 19th century, it is not so difficult to conceive of the extension of this literal kind of *chambre* to the concept of the *chambre mentale*.³⁰

The state-sponsored revival of art as decoration, the feminine construction of the bourgeois home as a refuge from the world of public masculinity, and the emphasis of the *psychologie nouvelle* (*new psychology*) on mental interiority and hypnotic impression converge in the works of Edouard Vuillard. The famous neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot was fascinated by the association between color and emotional states in hypnotized patients, and by their tendency to project or “externalize their inner visions.”³¹ Hippolyte Bernheim challenged Charcot’s theory by arguing that normal individuals, not just hysterical patients, were deeply impressionable and that under certain conditions could transform idea into image: “Suggestibility, is such that, in the waking state, an idea accepted by the brain becomes...an image.”³² The artist thus replaced the hypnotist as “the agent of a direct, unmediated access to the unconscious.”³³ When looking at a painting, the viewer was expected to enter the state of consciousness achieved by the artist himself when producing the artwork; the purpose of looking at a painting was not to have access to some form of narrative within the space of the canvas, but rather, to dwell on its surface and to be lulled by its use of line and color. Vuillard’s *Le Piano* certainly evokes this prolonged contemplation. The reality of the viewer’s visual experience of

²⁸ Weber, 21.

²⁹ Furniture style and interior décor has a long history in France, not least because of its significance in setting certain tones for particular political regimes. These residences were of the utmost importance for political self-fashioning. (Louis XIV’s Versailles is a classic example). Furniture made in these various styles, then, was closely associated with the tenor of the regime and era that produced it. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette’s reign, for instance, was associated with lavish decadence. It was also considered a politically weak regime, since it ended in decapitation during the French Revolution, which abolished the monarchy entirely. Thus, furniture in this style was considered appropriate to femininity and its spaces in the home, Auslander, 280.

³⁰ The term “chambre mentale” can be translated here to mean “mental chamber.” However, it is significant that the word for room in French—*chambre*—is here correlated with the interiority of mind.

³¹ Silverman, 84.

³² Hippolyte Bernheim, qtd. in Silverman, 87.

³³ Silverman, 90.

drifting tranquilly from object to human form to patterned wall is emulated in the painted bourgeois women, who dwell among flowers in a self-fashioned interior. The room in the painting is evocative of the actual room in which the panel itself would likely have been displayed within the home of Dr. Vazquez.

In addition to the doctor, the Natanson family provided important patronage for Vuillard in the last decade of the 19th century and in the first five or so years of the 20th. These commissions from individuals were the foundation upon which the principles of this new decorative art rested. That is to say, the Nabis would certainly not have been able to so violently reject the impersonal capitalism of the dealer system had they not had the economic support of such patrons. Thadée Natanson met Vuillard in the summer of 1891 in the rue Pigalle, where the artist was living with the playwright Aurélien Lugné-Poe, and his fellow friends and painters, Maurice Denis and Pierre Bonnard. That same year, the Natanson brothers (Thadée and Alexandre) began publishing a literary and artistic journal known as *La Revue Blanche*, a magazine that became “the voice of the Parisian intellectual community,”³⁴ dedicated to the connoisseurship of “all that was new, whether it be sports, food, politics, science, or art.”³⁵ As literary agents, the brothers gave this new art a place on the pages of their journal; as collectors and patrons, they arranged for exhibits of the artists’ work and commissioned decorative panels for their own homes. Their salons served as the meeting place for dozens of eclectic and important literary figures, playwrights, and artists of the period. It is likely that at one such gathering Vuillard first encountered Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec—the man known for his depictions of an entirely different kind of feminine interior—the brothel.

Born on November 24, 1864 in a provincial mansion in Albi in the southwest of France, Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec Montfa was the eldest son of the Comte Alphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec and Adèle Tapié de Céleyran. The young Toulouse-Lautrec was steeped from an early age in the glorious tales of his ancestors, one of whom had led the first crusade to Jerusalem in 1096. The young Henri had been taught to take pride in the noble blood coursing through his veins, but his childhood hardly reflected the stories of grandeur that his family told. The status of nobles in France had declined considerably since the French Revolution, and Toulouse-Lautrec’s father is said to have commented to an archbishop once, “Ah, Monseigneur, the days are gone when the counts of Toulouse could sodomize a monk and hang him afterwards if it so pleased them.”³⁶ It is no wonder that the young Henri felt alienated from his largely absent father. It became increasingly apparent that he was a frail child, and when he broke one leg in 1878 and the other less than a year later, his bones stopped growing altogether and he remained five feet tall for the rest of his life. His family insisted that Henri’s weakness manifested itself after “an incompetent doctor set a broken leg badly,”³⁷ but a posthumous analysis suggests that Toulouse-Lautrec probably suffered from a type of dwarfism caused by the

³⁴ Groom, *Beyond the Easel*, 16.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁶ Comte Alphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec, qtd. in Riva Castleman and Wolfgang Wittrock, *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec: Images of the 1890s* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), 22.

³⁷ Castleman, 22.

fact that his parents were first cousins and his grandmothers were sisters. Whatever the reason for his numerous mishaps, his lengthy periods of convalescence gave Henri ample time to explore his artistic capacities.

When Lautrec was twelve his doting mother took him to Paris, where he began studying with the academic painter Léon Bonnat, who promptly judged his pupil's work to be "downright atrocious."³⁸ Lautrec was not deterred, and under the instruction of his next teacher, Fernand Cormon, he learned the basic principles of academic painting and technique. In defiance of the aristocratic world to which he could never fully belong because of his physical deformity, Henri established himself as "a working artist, not a dilettante."³⁹ Toulouse-Lautrec's popularity soared in 1891 with the widespread distribution of his first poster advertising the Moulin Rouge, a popular dancehall in Montmartre. In this demimonde of cafés-concerts, cabarets, and brothels the artist would develop his distinctive style and would find himself more at home than in his privileged milieu.

It is impossible to determine precisely when Lautrec's series of paintings of brothels and prostitutes was executed, though it seems probable that they date roughly from 1893-1894.⁴⁰ At this time, the artist began living in a *maison close* in the rue des Moulins. Its rooms were luxuriously decorated in styles ranging from medieval to Louis XVI, designed to please individual clients.⁴¹ Accounts suggest that the artist was on friendly terms with the *filles*⁴², who referred to him fondly as "Monsieur Henri." These women appealed to him as subjects because, "The professional model is always a stuffed owl. These girls are alive."⁴³ Toulouse-Lautrec's painting *Au Salon de la Rue des Moulins*, though larger and more imposing than some of his more modest renderings of prostitutes and brothels, is a prime example of his work in the Parisian demi-monde. The numerous studies and sketches of the individual women who appear in the painting indicate recourse to the techniques of history painting he would no doubt have learned from Bonnat and Cormon.⁴⁴ But unlike history painting, Lautrec's work was never intended for public display. "People might think I wanted to make a scandal," he told a friend who encouraged him to exhibit *Au Salon*.⁴⁵ It might instead have been destined for his own private interior.

Au Salon is populated by six female figures with varying degrees of the red hair that so fascinated Toulouse-Lautrec.⁴⁶ The viewer is confronted by the deep maroon color that covers a very large portion of the foreground of the brothel's interior. The eye moves across the expansive sofa toward the back of the salon through an open space between two sets of cushions, framed by

³⁸ Léon Bonnat, qtd. in Castleman, 26.

³⁹ Castleman, 27.

⁴⁰ Richard Thomson, *Toulouse-Lautrec* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 406.

⁴¹ Castleman, 32.

⁴² This term can be literally translated to mean "girls," though it refers more specifically to working class women of the lower classes who often worked officially or unofficially as prostitutes.

⁴³ Jacques Lassaigue, *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec* (Switzerland: Skira, 1953), 73.

⁴⁴ Thomson, 425.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 427.

⁴⁶ Lassaigue, 71.

women who rest against the central pillar and the back walls. This horizontal recession is visually countered by the parallel verticals of pillars, doorframes, wall hangings, and the human figures. The floor appears to ascend and flatten as it recedes toward the back wall, where the outlined clarity of the figures in the foreground contrasts with the confusion of half-finished lines and ghostly greenish-grays that spread across the doorframe at the right rear edge of the canvas. The movement evoked by the rapidity with which the sketch-like lines across the back of the painting are rendered differs sharply from the static, massive quality of the women (specifically the three at the front) who are delineated by thick dark lines.

The position of the viewer vis-à-vis the women is as ambiguous as the relationship between the figures themselves. The spectator is situated more or less at eye level with the prostitutes, as though seated opposite them on a similar couch—are we one of them? The woman in a high-collared pink dress, hands clasped, lips pursed—undoubtedly the Madame of the house or her assistant—sits upright and dignified among her more tawdry companions. She looks vaguely in our direction—perhaps we’ve gotten up from our place on the couch and are moving to occupy the empty place next to the woman clasping her stockinged leg? If so, the other women take no notice. They lounge languidly with bored expressions on their heavily made-up faces, staring blankly at distant people or objects to which the viewer does not have access. The space of the painting does not suggest any interaction among the figures, frustrating the potential for physical contact between them: the woman closest to the viewer, separated from the Madame by a harshly outlined pillow, looks toward the woman violently bisected by the right edge of the canvas who faces away and casually lifts up her dress (for a medical inspection? a client?); the woman in black behind and to the left of the sofa is partially obscured by the figures in the foreground and looks outward at no one in particular; these four figures are in turn separated from the two reclining women, at left, by the large pillar that divides the center of the canvas; the pair sits listlessly against the wall, gazing uncertainly at the void where the medical inspector or client might be.

It is precisely this void, this absence of the male client or doctor, which marks *Au Salon* as a strictly female interior. In this one sense, Lautrec’s work is much like the space of Vuillard’s painting. The economic exchange involved in trading bodies for money is merely suggested here by the low-cut dresses and wandering eyes of the women who look toward the other half of a potential transaction. In much the same way, *Le Piano* is utterly devoid of the men who might represent the capitalist dealings of the world outside. Yet evidence of these supposedly invisible dealings is everywhere—etched into the back of the richly decorated chair and reflected in the sheen of the piano being played.

The complicated relationship between the bourgeois home and the brothel was inscribed in the very structure of the buildings themselves. Many of the *maisons closes* were once stately private residences that had been abandoned by the wealthy as the stylishness of these neighborhoods declined.⁴⁷ The Madame of one such establishment in the rue d’Amboise actually commissioned a series of panels from Toulouse-Lautrec in 1892. The sixteen canvases measured

⁴⁷ Gerstle Mack, *Toulouse-Lautrec* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 248.

six feet tall and displayed various decorative motifs that complemented the 18th-century style décor of the brothel's interior. In each case, whether the artwork treated the bourgeois home (as with Vuillard) or the brothel (in the case of Toulouse-Lautrec), it subscribed to a decorative craft tradition. This strange mirroring of the function of these paintings is paralleled by the fact that the prostitute and the bourgeois woman both came to occupy equally important places in the political discourse at the end of the 19th century.

These two types of women were socially and economically linked to one another by the bourgeois men who frequented both. A middle class man of respectable standing who, if he were as savvy as Victor Hugo, would generously record his sexual expenses under the category of "Charity" in the budget book so crucial to any decent bourgeois home,⁴⁸ was as much the victim of his milieu as the wife he kept at home or the woman whose bed he occupied at night. For much of the bourgeoisie, marriage was strictly an economic arrangement whose purpose was to produce the much-needed offspring for the French nation. Furthermore, sex was a duty, not a pleasure, and a wife's enjoyment of intercourse meant scandal. Economic reality forced the bourgeois male to marry late, exacerbating the frustrations inherent to a system that made women inaccessible by idealizing them. This produced what Freud identified as "the two erotic poles of the Victorian man—idealization and degradation,"⁴⁹ the latter implying, of course, the recourse to prostitutes necessitated by this restraint on bourgeois sexuality. Once the limitations of virginity had been overcome through marriage, other problems cropped up to take their place. Women who feared pregnancy as a burden and health risk encouraged their husbands to satisfy their lust elsewhere. As Eugen Weber has pointed out, it was perhaps this resistance to sexual contact on the part of their wives, and not the tantalizing lure of the prostitute, that sent men to brothels. The prostitute had become absolutely essential to the struggle for the preservation of feminine virtue. These "égout[s] des spermes,"⁵⁰ as they were called, would be just that—a limitless repository for the insatiable lust of potentially dangerous men. As far as government officials were concerned, "La prostituée est indispensable à la cité comme la poubelle à la famille."⁵¹

In the last years of the 19th century a new fear gripped the bourgeoisie and threatened to marginalize the prostitute yet again. The spread of syphilis was killing off the innocent babies of diseased mothers. While the estimate for infant deaths caused by syphilis in 1889 was found to be thirteen for every 100 born, by 1901 a survey of 20,000 pregnancies suggested that the parents' syphilis was responsible for the child's death 42% of the time.⁵² What was worse, these were often the children of reputable mothers who paid for the licentious indulgences of their husbands. The Société de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale (Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxy) was formed in 1901 as, in the words of its founder Alfred Fournier, "a veritable

⁴⁸ Corbin, 194.

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, qtd. in Corbin, 194.

⁵⁰ Literally, "sperm sewers." Thomson, 406.

⁵¹ "The prostitute is as indispensable to the city as the garbage can is to the family." Susanna Barrows, Lecture on Prostitutes and Sewers, History 100.1, University of California, Berkeley, March 16, 2006.

⁵² Corbin, 262.

league against syphilis,”⁵³ to advocate sex education for middle and upper bourgeois youth. It encouraged chastity to avoid the perils of casual sexual encounters. If the earlier solution had been a moralizing campaign aimed at containing prostitution through the establishment of the working class family, now bourgeois youth were being targeted as key to the preservation of bourgeois norms.

But a significant shift had occurred within the middle class household. In rejecting her “duty” as a wife to have intercourse with her husband, the new bourgeois woman had asserted her right independent of him. In this atmosphere of increased sexual liberation and appearance alone in public, the bourgeois woman was more liable to be seduced and relegated to the ranks of the fallen women. What the bourgeois woman lost in respectability, the prostitute gained in appearance. Alain Corbin has argued that a revolution in the male imagination as the century wore on radically altered the nature of prostitution. The bourgeoisie inherited an affinity for courtly love from the aristocracy whose social position they had usurped; similarly, the petite bourgeoisie sought to imitate their social betters. This desire for “eroticism within the appearances of a bourgeois home”⁵⁴ led men to reject the sordid reality of trading money for sex in favor of the illusion of seduction. The cafés-concerts and theaters of Montmartre and the Latin Quarter provided optimal conditions for the semblance of seducing an *artiste* instead of simply paying for a prostitute; a man might enjoy a drink with her, pay for her dinner, and receive her sexual favors in the guise of amorous desire. As economic prosperity increased between 1896 and 1913, the demand for urban prostitution also rose.⁵⁵ Men had more time and more money; women had more freedom and more education—factors which seemed to promise greater social mobility but which in reality condemned them, according to the Comte d’Haussonville, to “oscillate, uncertain of their future, between the condition that they have left and the one that they have not yet been able to attain.”⁵⁶ The same was true for the petit bourgeois woman whose ambiguous social position and aspirations to ascend the social ladder led her to exchange her body for the support and security of the bourgeois male so key to her integration and elevation.⁵⁷ No longer merely a venal outlet for the sexual frustrations of middle class men, prostitution had begun to take on certain characteristics of the world whose polar opposite it was supposed to be.

In this context, Toulouse-Lautrec’s ornately decorated interior of the brothel in *Au Salon*, or his set of panels intended to adorn the walls of the rococo-style *maison* in the rue d’Amboise, seem less contradictory in their clear imitation of bourgeois décor. As the 19th century turned into the 20th, the *maisons de rendez-vous*⁵⁸ as they were innocently called, became the preferred site of anonymous sexual contact between bourgeois men and women who claimed to be “honest.” Instead of offering sumptuous rooms decorated varyingly as harems, torture chambers, and Moorish palaces, the seduction of these establishments lay in their resemblance to bourgeois interiors with expensive furniture and papered walls hung with artwork. Money was handled by a

⁵³ Alfred Fournier, qtd. in Corbin, 265.

⁵⁴ Corbin, 186.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 211.

⁵⁶ Comte d’Haussonville, qtd. in Corbin, 210.

⁵⁷ Corbin, 211.

⁵⁸ Literally, “meeting houses.”

mistress of the house, and never by the women who ultimately prostituted themselves, further distancing fact from fact. The pleasure was in breaking the taboos of the heavily protected bourgeois home; the man's hope was to find another man's wife there.⁵⁹ In 1888, only 15 *maisons de rendez-vous* were counted; by 1904 that number had risen to 114, and in the years immediately following the figure was estimated at 200.⁶⁰

By the early years of the 20th century, a new kind of bourgeois interior had come into being: that of the independent divorcée, or indeed, of the modern woman who never married. Rather than emulate the homes of their middle class contemporaries, these women broke from bourgeois norms by playing on styles associated with prostitution.⁶¹ In Colette's *La Vagabonde* (1911), the main character explains her plans for furnishing her new home as follows: "I'm having all of the divan cushions re-covered, you know. And then I'm pushing the divan itself right into the corner, and I'm going to have an electric lamp fixed above it." "Splendid!" her companion replies. "It'll look just like a brothel."⁶² State officials had sanctioned utilitarian prostitution as a necessary foil for the bourgeois woman they so needed and wished to protect. Now brothel walls were being papered over to look like parlors, and newly independent women from respectable backgrounds were choosing colors that firmly associated them with prostitutes. Something serious had happened in spite of the government's best efforts.

Amid this confusion of containment and transgression, degeneration and regeneration, economic pessimism and nationalistic optimism, the 20th century was born. What it would inherit from the previous century remained to be determined, but one thing was certain: this new era had to be protected at all costs—from creeping social malady, economic decline, and most importantly, from Germany. France had been preparing for the century's turn for a long time, so that by the time it arrived, a universal exhibition had been planned in its honor. A monument was erected in tribute—not the masculine, utilitarian structure of iron and steel that might easily be obscured by German industry and engineering prowess, but instead a feminine statue embodying all that was quintessentially French: a colossal, 100-foot-tall woman dressed in an evening gown by renowned couturier Jeanne Paquin. But *La Parisienne* would prove less permanent than her 1889 counterpart, the Eiffel Tower—the eternal reminder of the elusive potential for industrial greatness that would push the nation to crisis.

As France contended with competing nations abroad, the Third Republic was fighting a losing battle of containment at home. By the early years of the 20th century, both the bourgeois woman and the urban prostitute had been firmly established as indispensable to the nation in the rhetoric of the Republic. The key was making sure they remained separate. The increasingly complicated division of interior space based on gender in bourgeois homes pushed the respectable interior to the opposite extreme of the brothel, where the bodies of men and women mingled freely in interiors whose very purpose was to flout this separation. The new type of

⁵⁹ Corbin, 175.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Auslander, 293.

⁶² Colette, qtd. in Auslander, 293.

bourgeois woman had already been identified as a threat to the bourgeois home, but her fault increasingly lay in her rejection of family and the production of offspring to defend France against Germany (recall Bertillon's frightening statement: "It is fatal that Germany will have twice as many conscripts as France in fourteen years.") By the beginning of the 20th century, France's social inferiority also posed a potential threat to the nation by contaminating its military potential; one doctor commented, "The nation that first manages to reduce [venereal disease] will gain a considerable superiority over its enemies."⁶³ If the nation depended for survival on its ability to define the role of women such that offspring were produced and a national industry of feminized luxury products revived (with regulated prostitutes serving, of course, as the necessary evil to keep this system functioning), then those who deviated from those roles were perceived as threats to the sanctity of France. As the 20th century drew on, these necessary boundaries began to rupture. The bourgeois home seeped into the brothel, while signs associated with prostitution became increasingly apparent in the interiors of the newly independent bourgeois woman.

Le Piano and *Au Salon de la Rue des Moulins* appear at first glance to be paintings of two extremely different worlds which reinforce Freud's notion of the "two erotic poles of the Victorian man—idealization and degradation."⁶⁴ Yet in reality, these works are merely reassuring fictions that do not reflect the actual complexity of the migration of social signs of femininity taking place at the turn of the century. The separateness of the spaces that Vuillard and Lautrec painted was challenged and complicated by the *femme nouvelle's* renegotiation of femininity through her rejection of the bourgeois home and her usurpation of signs from the world of the prostitute in the decoration of her interior. But this independent *bourgeoise* was only one symbol of the growing inability to keep these two worlds defined and contained; multiple economic and political factors bound up with the public world and the growing pressure from Germany were beginning to tear the seams of the social fabric. Upon closer examination of these works by Vuillard and Lautrec, it appears that Monsieur Genuys' contention that all art is a product of its time and so expresses a certain moral malaise and lack of unity, holds true. While the paintings seem to complacently maintain the fictive separateness of space, the alienation of the figures in each reveals more profound social angst. The treatment of figures as objects in the Vuillard is as disturbing as the physical isolation of the prostitutes in the Lautrec; in each instance, the anxiety about modernity's uncertain effect on the relationships between people and the spaces they occupy is highly visible beneath the surface of the paint.

⁶³ Abraham Flexner, qtd. in Corbin, 272.

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, qtd. in Corbin, 194.

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