

Ruth Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 298 pp., \$96.00 U.S.

Kathryn Brown

Volume 33, Number 1-2, 2008

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069560ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069560ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Brown, K. (2008). Review of [Ruth Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 298 pp., \$96.00 U.S.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 33(1-2), 140–142. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069560ar>

might have elevated her to the role of art patron as well). But there are also strong hints that Watkins resisted the forces of capitalism, turning first to the anti-modernist communities of the Roycrofters and the Lanier Camp, and later was sustained by a bohemian circle of artists and writers among her New York friends. Aspects of her working practice also attest to this resistance, evident in images such as *The Kitchen Sink* and *Phenix Cheese*, 1923. While the latter was produced for an advertisement, these photographs challenge commoditization by exposing the detritus of life: dirty dishes, food consumed, skin rubbed raw by harsh soap and hard work. Subject to ridicule and derision from critics at the time, the scum of milk floating in a bottle and a sink full of dirty dishes clearly struck a nerve.

With a nod to gender due to an association with the domestic realm, these images are largely interpreted by O'Connor and Tweedie as studies in formalism, although they do allow for the possibility of multiple readings. From the many photographs included, it appears that formal concerns were an overriding interest for Watkins. This focus attests to the lingering influence of Clarence White, whose philosophy that design is more significant than subject matter appears to have served her well. Watkins was clearly looking attentively at the world throughout her long life, and her interest in formal composition can be discerned in almost all of the work included here. This interest develops in the early portraits and still-life photographs of the 1920s and remains a persistent feature of the later work as well.

The sheer number of photographs provides a significant overview of Watkins' production, and, therefore, the book is a welcome addition to the history of photography and the partici-

pation of women in that history. Details of several photographs are included in a more contemporary, full-page format, but the majority are smaller images that closely approximate the historical presentation of photographs. It is in these many small-format reproductions that the interest in formalism is most clearly on display.

It might appear at times that feminist scholarship has successfully resurrected numerous forgotten or neglected women artists, yet this recent publication reveals that the project is far from complete. As a cautionary note, it is remarkable how easily an artist like Margaret Watkins, well known during her New York years, could be overlooked for so long. For O'Connor and Tweedie, this neglect is explained by gender, but I would argue that this is only part of the story. The lack of a significant patron or critic, her divided citizenship, her absence from the site of her most active artistic production, and an output that transgressed the boundaries between fine art, advertising, and documentary also played a role. With this book, the process of re-evaluation is well underway.

DEBRA ANTONCIC
PhD candidate, Queen's University

Notes

- ¹ Roger Hull, "Emplacement, Displacement, and the Fate of Photographs," *Multiple Views: Logan Grant Essays on Photography*, 1983–1989, ed. Daniel P. Younger (Albuquerque, 1991), 188.
- ² Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton (Boston, 1989), 23.

Ruth Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 298 pp., \$96.00 U.S.

Ruth Iskin's book sets out to explore and to analyze the relationship between Parisian consumer culture of late nineteenth-century Paris and the painting of Manet and the Impressionists. By focusing on the implicit and explicit manifestation of material culture in the works of these artists, the book aims to reinvent familiar themes and to revise key critical assumptions that have dominated art-historical research in this area in recent years. In particular, the book challenges the idea that women were excluded from the urban spaces of the modern city and illuminates ways in which avant-garde painting of the late nineteenth century both depicted and addressed contemporary women. Chapter one charts an important socio-cultural background that informs much of the later discussion in the

book. Drawing on examples from nineteenth-century advertising literature, Iskin offers insight into the cross-fertilization between Impressionist painting and popular imagery associated with consumer culture of the period. While the analyses of advertising imagery are illuminating in their own right, Iskin acknowledges that Impressionist painters did not explicitly depict the newly flourishing department stores in their works and that media images were not a direct influence on avant-garde art. Much of the book's argument is, therefore, driven by the need to find evidence for the "implicit but pervasive presence of Parisian consumer culture in the art of Manet and the Impressionists" (p. 7). It seeks to accomplish this by identifying both media images and avant-garde painting as part of an overarching "visual discourse of consumption" (p. 17) in which distinctions between high art and mass consumption became blurred.

A methodological question arises, however, as to the explanatory relation between the social discourse of mass con-

sumption and its visual instantiation in Impressionist art. In Iskin's book this gap is filled by numerous conjectures of which the following are just a few: Jules Chéret's posters would "most likely" have interested Manet and the Impressionists (p. 17); Chéret's representations of the Parisienne "may well have been influenced" by the works of Manet and the Impressionists (p. 17); Degas's interest in displays of hats was "most likely" prompted by his perception of fashion displays (p. 100); Caillebotte "might have had a certain interest in posters" (p. 124); Pissarro "may well" have depicted kitchen gardens rather than Parisian markets for some of the reasons that motivated Zola (p. 168). Such conjectures undermine the force of many otherwise good arguments put forward in the book and raise doubts about whether the manifestation of consumer discourse in avant-garde painting was intentional or accidental or, in some cases, whether consumer culture was any influence at all. This point becomes a significant issue in chapter four, as I shall discuss below.

The core element of chapter two is an analysis of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882). Iskin asks us to focus, in the first instance, not on the gaze of the *marchande* behind the bar, but rather on the bottles that surround her. Preferring to link the display of liquors to the world of commodity display rather than to an iconographic still-life tradition, Iskin brings a fresh approach to this familiar work. Turning to the depiction of the *marchande*, Iskin examines how the work takes up and challenges female stereotypes familiar from advertising imagery of the period. While locating the work at the intersection of "selling and seduction" (p. 58), Iskin argues that the key innovation of the work lies in its identification of woman as both object and spectator in the consumer culture of the day.

The idea of female agency underlying this statement becomes one of the core elements of the book and leads to some of the most original contributions that Iskin makes to this field of art history (see in particular the discussion of chapter three below). However, making the case for female spectatorship in and of nineteenth-century avant-garde painting sometimes leads Iskin to overstate her case. Linking the depiction of women as spectators/consumers to "changes in the status of women in French society during the second half of the nineteenth century," Iskin suggests that the "*marchande* as well as the female spectators on the balcony of *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* are both exemplary of the fact that women increasingly participated in the public sphere" (p. 46). This argument skims over the complicated trajectory of feminism in France during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. More importantly, it overlooks the distinction between the public spaces of the city (where women of different classes were increasingly visible) and the public sphere of politics and citizenship (from which all women were legally excluded under the provisions of the Civil Code). Being a participant in consumer society does not rival

political enfranchisement for the purposes of inclusion in the "public sphere."

Similar problems arise in Iskin's use of other key terms. For a book that purports to re-evaluate familiar critical assumptions that have shaped the reception of nineteenth-century avant-garde painting, key terms such as "modern life," "modernity," and "flâneur" are employed in an uncritical and sometimes inconsistent way. This problem is more than merely terminological. Crucial to Iskin's argument is the idea that a focus on the influence of consumer culture on the works discussed challenges the received understanding of "modernity." Yet the different, often conflicting, social, aesthetic, and political trends that inform this concept remain undifferentiated. While Manet and the Impressionists may have enunciated certain socially modern developments in an aesthetically modern way, they did so in a set of conditions that were also comprised of distinctively non-modern elements, most notably selective political enfranchisement. By flattening Impressionist painting under a single, overarching concept of modernity, Iskin risks reinforcing the very concept she seeks to challenge.

Similarly, literary critics and art historians have in recent years teased apart the concept of the "flâneur," differentiating its signalling of an aesthetic stance from the characterization of urban experience more generally, and identifying changes in the term's meaning from the early nineteenth century to the Third Republic. Iskin, however, uses the term "flâneur" as a catch-all to describe a male perspective made up variously of painters, writers, and passers-by, thereby avoiding the nuances implied by this troublesome, but key term.

The arguments in chapter three concern readings of Degas's works featuring millinery shops and are amongst the most successful in the book. Iskin explores Degas's millinery works in the context of earlier Impressionist representations of fashion and locates the depiction of hats and fashion items against models of nineteenth-century consumer display generally. By focusing on ways in which women were depicted as being included in these scenes as both consumers and workers, Iskin develops a persuasive alternative to a line of feminist criticism in which women are interpreted as the sexualized object of an implicit male gaze. Acts of female agency are analyzed around the nexus of making, selling, and buying luxury items. Sensitive to distinctions between different types of consumer environments (boutiques, *haute couture* salons, department stores), Iskin examines how Degas's works foreground female spectatorship. Different forms of looking, including the gaze of the artisan, the consumer, and the woman contemplating her own image, reveal nineteenth-century consumer environments to be a fertile ground for challenging the idea that the male gaze structured the visual representation of public spaces.

Chapter four identifies and isolates specific motifs from consumer environments (storefronts, shop signs, displays, and

advertisements) and examines the significance of such motifs in city scenes by Manet and the Impressionists during the 1870s and 1880s. By focusing on these often-overlooked aspects of familiar works, Iskin offers the reader a new perspective from which to analyze the primary figures in the works. Her readings of Manet's *At the Café* (1878) and Degas's *Women on the Terrace of a Café in the Evening* (1877) are particularly successful examples of this approach.

Less clear in chapter four is how the works support the argument that Manet and the Impressionists expressed "a modernist ambivalence about consumer culture and its representation in art" (p. 115), and why the works perform "inconspicuous subversions" (p. 132) or should be construed as "subtle forms of resistance" (p. 115). The motivation of such resistance and subversion remains unclear. Once again, the problem of structuring the core argument of the book around the idea of a background discourse comes to the fore. Iskin's description of the presence of consumer imagery (in the broadest sense) in the works of Manet and the Impressionists as the product of a late nineteenth-century "visual discourse" allows her to remain equivocal on whether an artist such as Manet was "critical of mass consumption, was complicit with it, or even celebrated it" (p. 58). Such arguments become difficult to sustain when arguing that Manet and the Impressionists were resistant to, or subversive of, consumer culture. A strategy of subversion not only renders the background discourse explicit, but also implies the assumption of an active stance on the part of the agent, regardless of whether that stance is "inconspicuous" or not. In short, therefore, there is a tension between the active strategies of subversion purportedly identified in chapter four and the way in which the relationship between modernist painting and consumer culture is characterized in the preceding chapters.

Chapter five moves beyond Parisian consumer culture to discuss depictions of village markets and kitchen gardens, primarily in the works of Caillebotte and Pissarro. Using Zola's *Le ventre de Paris* as a starting point, Iskin examines a range of issues relating to the visual display of sales products, oppositions between market and retail spaces, and the commodification of nature. Pissarro's rejection of Parisian markets in his depictions of village life is linked to his anarchist politics and the personal conflicts he experienced in having to participate directly in one of Paris's biggest markets, namely, the thriving space in which art was bought and sold. Analyses of Caillebotte's visual transformation of poultry, game, and meat into merchandise complement discussions of consumer display in earlier chapters. While the conclusion that Caillebotte's paintings can be viewed as "cool visual analyses implying an ironic commentary" on Parisian consumer culture is not fully substantiated, the chapter nevertheless provides an insightful context in which to view

Caillebotte's visual transformation not just of nature, but of the still-life tradition itself.

Chapter six surveys a range of interesting background material relating to the image of the nineteenth-century Parisienne and her role in consumer culture, the fashion industry, and the shaping of French national identity. Developing arguments made in chapters two and three concerning the depiction of women as active participants in urban spaces, Iskin argues that images of the Parisienne are representative of a form of femininity in which self-presentation is an act of agency. With her blend of "tough urban femininity" and self-control, the woman in Manet's *Spring* (1881), for example, is described as "a picture of feminine agency under the rule of spectacle" (p. 214). Similarly, Madame Guillemet in Manet's *In the Conservatory* (1879) is "an agent in her self-display," her tight-fitting, fashionable outfit being likened to "social armor" (p. 222).

That the depiction of these women inscribes an act of female agency is a more difficult argument to sustain than in the case of Degas's millinery scenes. In works that depict women not engaged in any activity other than self-display, the question arises as to what actually constitutes this agency. Iskin may be arguing that the female agency involved in public self-presentation is based on the decision-making involved in selecting fashion items, adding handmade decoration, and combining materials into fashionable ensembles. While such activities are discussed at the beginning of chapter six, they are not directly raised in the analyses of the works themselves. Instead, emphasis is placed on the "aloof," "self-assured," "vacant," and "invulnerable" appearance of the women. Not only does the act of agency remain difficult to pinpoint in such an analysis, but confusion arises as to where crucial boundaries are to be drawn. Iskin leaves unexplained what visual evidence can be asserted to explain why some fashionably depicted women are agents in their self-presentation while others are not, or why Madame Guillemet's tight-fitting dress should be viewed as "social armour" rather than as the product of social constriction.

Methodological concerns aside, there is plenty to engage with in Iskin's analysis of late nineteenth-century consumer culture and its explicit or implicit manifestation in the works of Manet and the Impressionists. With contributions made at the levels of both background context and analyses of key works, the book is a welcome addition to the literature in this area and has something to offer readers who are new to, or well acquainted with, the field of French avant-garde painting of the late nineteenth century.

KATHRYN BROWN
University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom