MODERN ART
PRACTICES AND DEBATES

Modernity and Modernism
French Painting in the Nineteenth Century

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CHAPTER 3
GENDER AND REPRESENTATION

by Tamar Garb

Introduction

In a lecture given in connection with the Renoir retrospective in London in 1985 the speaker declared that to bring a feminist analysis to bear upon a Renoir painting was akin to 'playing a violin with a spanner [wrench]'. For this speaker the Renoir painting and feminism occupied two, irreconcilable worlds: the one the sphere of Art, autonomous and disinterested, the other the realm of politics, of vested interests, partiality and 'real-life' struggles. The substance of his metaphor is that a feminist analysis is inappropriate to Art. In his view, the result of such a conjunction could only be jarring. But what are these apparently incompatible worlds which our speaker invoked? The Renoir painting is the product of the hand of an individually named famous artist who has an acknowledged place in academic histories of art. Feminism is a political position, it is a 'world-view', a philosophical mode of enquiry, something both open and contested. The image associated with the painting here is the violin: finely tuned, demanding sensitive handling, refined, with its connotations of harmony, pleasure and a cultured sensibility. Feminism's tool on the other hand is the 'spanner': utilitarian, mechanical, clumsy. The implication is that feminism invades the elevated world of Culture with the extraneous concerns of life, and that Art is thereby diminished or spoiled.

Our Renoir scholar has an illustrious pedigree of intellectual forebears and much of the institutional fabric of the art-world (curators, publishers, connoisseurs) behind him. He speaks the language of 'commonsense' and of good taste. When faced, for example, with Renoir's *La Loge* (Plate 202) there are few art-lovers who would want to destroy what they have been taught is their innocent 'pleasure in looking', and the suspicion is that feminism does just that.

For feminists, neither the experience of 'pleasure' nor the processes of 'looking' are neutral and value-free. Both are intricately connected to the different ways we have learned to live as men or women in the world. There is no single solution which feminist theory offers to explain the differences between men and women, but most reject the idea that these are located entirely in our biologies or our fixed 'natures'. Biological essentialists do trace such differences back to biology alone, positing an unchanging biological essence or singling out an identifiable physiological cause which they see as the origin of human behaviour. Other kinds of essentialists see men and women as having fixed and unchanging differences which stem from psychological or mental predispositions (for example, men are rational, women emotional). These are sometimes, but not always, traced back to biology.

Plate 202 Auguste Renoir, *La Loge*, 1874, oil on canvas, 80 x 64 cm. Courtauld Institute Galleries, London.

There are certainly some feminists who link their theories to biological roots, but feminist theorists from different schools argue more often over the psychic and social meaning of masculinity and femininity. Everyone acknowledges that men and women have different sexual characteristics and capacities, for example women can give birth, men cannot, but it is the value and meaning that different societies and cultures attribute to this fact, these differences, not the differences themselves, that is important for much feminist scholarship. Some feminists place their emphasis on social conditioning and the learning of behavioural roles which become internalized as our natural 'femininity' or 'masculinity', usually called 'gender' differences. Others object to such explanations for they allege that they are premised on the assumption that society is normatively heterosexual and that the acquisition of gender identities is a stable and unproblematic process which is achieved and maintained without difficulty. These theorists focus, therefore, on the instability of difference and, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, locate its acquisition in the complex psychic journey which each 'subject' undergoes unconsciously, in the difficult passage through childhood and adolescence towards an adult 'masculinity' or 'femininity' which are always unstable. Such 'subject positions' are said to stem from what is usually called 'sexual difference' rather than 'gender difference', the latter most often implying the *social* acquisition of identity. While many theorists work with both these models in an attempt to integrate the psychic with the social, others opt for one or the other. In this discussion you are sure to find references to both sexual and gender difference and the difficulty of maintaining a rigid distinction between them will, at times, become apparent. Feminists often use psychoanalytic theories as a tool for understanding the formation of subject positions or a culture's maintenance of distinct categories of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' within a specific historical context. How identities (fragile as they may be) are learned within such a situation might involve psychic adaptation to social norms.

In this chapter I shall be using terms like 'subject' as opposed to 'individual' or 'person' to suggest that the identities of which we speak are not fixed, predetermined or secure, but are produced by the forces to which they are subjected and in relation to which they assert their subjectivity. Men and women, it is here assumed, are not at the 'origin' of their world but are the products of it. They take up a position in relation to those forces. 'Subjectivity' is understood as the available way in which people live out what appears to them as their individuality. To use this terminology signals an understanding that men and women do not possess a given identity which pre-exists language but learn who they are through acquiring language. For much feminist theory, this is a crucial starting point.

In the last two decades, the issues of viewing and spectatorship and their relationship to questions of gender and sexuality have received much attention from feminists. Few have remained unaffected by the theories of looking which film theorists, many working with psychoanalytic concepts, have developed. Although the language of psychoanalysis is highly specialized and esoteric, and the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism remains contentious, it has provided a set of symbolic terms which have become indispensable to much contemporary cultural analysis. Looking is central to psychoanalytic analyses of the acquisition of subjectivity for, in psychoanalytic theory, it is through sight that a recognition of sexual difference first occurs in the infant boy or girl. The focus for Freud is less on the scene which is looked at than on what the developing subject does, unconsciously, with that which is seen. As Jaqueline Rose has put it, for psychoanalysis 'the relationship between viewer and scene is always one of fracture, partial identification, pleasure and distrust' ('Sexuality in the field of vision', p.227). A theory of art which is influenced by psychoanalytic theory could see the viewing of art as haunted by such psychic processes. The very phrase, 'pleasure in looking' has its own name, 'scopophilia', in psychoanalytic theory, and is listed in classical Freudian theory as one of the 'component instincts' from which adult sexual instinct develops. Looking, for Freud, can be associated with forms of exclusively masculine response where gratification

Plate 203 Alexandre Cabanel, *La Naissance de Vénus* (*The Birth of Venus*), 1863, oil on canvas, 130 x 225 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

is derived from a disavowal of fear through fetishism (where objects are endowed with sexual significance and through which sexual gratification is sought so that fear of loss of power (castration) is compensated for) or voyeurism (where sexual gratification is achieved through surreptitious looking at the sexual activities or parts of others). Visual images can substitute for such scenes, and responses can be seen as collective (even dominant) ways of looking for some psychoanalytic cultural theorists. For example, the repeated representation of parts of women's bodies in advertising can be analysed as a form of fetishism which is culturally acceptable in Western societies in the late twentieth century. Within this theoretical framework, looking and the pleasures derived from it are profoundly linked to questions of sexuality and may be connected to our earliest psychic experiences. There is no such thing as a simple 'pleasure in looking'. Nor is it ever politically innocent; power is always at stake.

For feminism the very phrase 'pleasure in looking' raises the questions: whose pleasure and whose looking is at stake? What is the relationship between power and the act of looking or being looked at? Who has the right to look and how is looking legitimated and culturally coded? And crucially for us, how do the processes of representation and the act of looking *at* art or the elaborate conventions by which looking is staged *in* art, relate to the conditions of looking in life for men and women? One of the earliest discussions of this problem was made by the critic John Berger in the early 1970s who, in what appears now as an overgeneralized and oversimplified polarization, claimed that *'men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p.47). This proposition constructs men as the active bearers of the look, women as its object, trapped in narcissistic self-obsession. Men and women operate in such an account as monolithic categories, taking no account of the social and sexual differences which may actually exist among them. The dominant images of Woman in art (as beautiful spectacle, penitent Magdalen or pious Madonna) stand for the position in which actual women find themselves in Western culture. For Berger, one of the systems of representation which brings image and 'life' into an active engagement with each other is advertising, but 'High Art' is equally implicated in establishing and maintaining existing

power relations. The special status accorded to 'Art' is, for Berger, a form of mystification which perpetuates oppressive social relations.

The objectification (reducing to the level of an object) of women in representation is one of the main themes of Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock's influential study *Old Mistresses*, published in 1981. In describing the tradition of the female nude in modern Western painting, they echo Berger's formulation in attributing an active, powerful gaze to men while seeing the representation of women as enshrining their passivity. Referring to images like Cabanel's *The Birth of Venus*, 1863 (Plate 203), they write:

> The images reproduce on the ideological level of art the relations of power between men and women. Woman is present as an image but with the specific connotations of body and nature, that is passive, available, possessable, powerless. Man is absent from the image but it is his speech, his view, his position of dominance which the images signify.
> (Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, p.116)

What Parker and Pollock stress is that the customary objectification of Woman in representation is a function of male fantasy. It tells us more about the dominant construction of masculinity, its projections, fears and anxieties, than it ever could about the femininity which it purports to represent. Femininity in such a representational system is conditional on an absent, masculine creativity, which defines and controls the world it creates. For writers like Berger, Parker and Pollock, Art is particularly implicated in the formation and cementing of the unequal power relations between men and women. Art does not only reflect these but constitutes one of the sites of their formation. The way that traditional patterns of 'looking' and 'being looked at' are related to gender identity and accepted notions of sexual pleasure are crucial in this respect.

For the typical viewer of Renoir's *La Loge*, who takes pleasure in the spectacle of a richly textured surface on which a beautiful woman, elaborately costumed, is depicted, pleasure may seem like the most natural response in the world, but it is nevertheless one that is socially legitimated and historically specific. By this, I mean that it is one which a particular society at a given historical moment, sanctions and endorses. No one would argue, surely, that a person from a different culture (let us say, Islamic,) or a different time (the Middle Ages, perhaps) would not 'see' Renoir's image differently. If culture, time and place are implicated in 'seeing', then so might race, class, gender, or age be. The socially and psychically produced look, the non-innocent look of culture, has come to be known in contemporary theory as the 'gaze'. The 'gaze' is never arbitrary, personal or idiosyncratic. To talk about the 'gaze' is to talk about shared, habitual modes of vision through which the human subject in particular social contexts looks, and is looked at. For feminists, men and women have, necessarily, a different relationship to processes of looking and being looked at (ie. 'the gaze'). It is these differences which are addressed in much of the work of the contemporary feminist artist Barbara Kruger, who juxtaposes images (culled from advertising and art) with pithy sayings and words to point to some of the ways in which men and women are positioned in relation to the gaze in Western systems of representation (Plate 204).

Renoir's *La Loge*

Let us now explore some of these issues in relation to *La Loge*. The painting was exhibited at what has subsequently come to be called the 'first Impressionist exhibition' of 1874. That it demonstrates consummate skill and facility in terms of the aesthetic principles according to which it was produced, is, by now, undisputed. *La Loge* is traditionally discussed in the literature as an example of virtuoso paint handling, of summary treatment, dazzling light effects, evocations of transparency and opacity and fluid drawing. Few people would now argue with this description, although what now stands for fluidity of handling might in the Paris of the 1870s have denoted sloppiness; luminosity now,

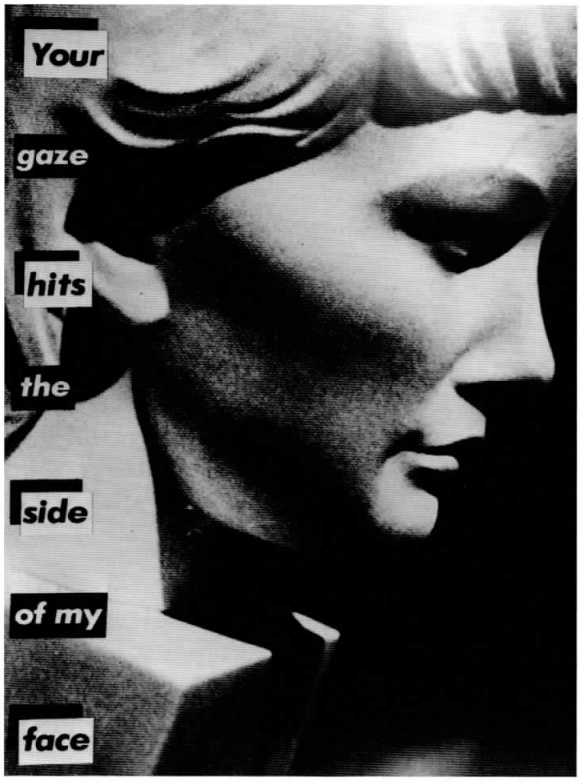

Plate 204 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*, 1981, photograph, 55 x 41 cm. Collection of Vijak Mahdavi and Bernardo Nadal-Ginaud, courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York. Photo: Zindman/Fremont.

could have been garishness then; lightness of touch could easily have seemed like a lack of finish. Interpretation is by no means static and there is nothing neutral about description. When now made to stand as a 'European masterpiece' *La Loge* does its job well. There seems to be nothing 'in the picture itself' which goes against the grain of such a designation. We have long forgotten the anxiety which its technique and the site of its initial exhibition caused some of its original viewers (except as an indication of their ignorance). Nor does the world presented to us by Renoir conflict with the notion of appropriate social roles endorsed by our own dominant culture (as enshrined in mainstream cinema, much popular fiction, advertising and some contemporary art). A richly jewelled woman dressed in sumptuous décolletage is placed at the front of an opera box, eyes demurely unfocused, fan and handkerchief (appropriately 'feminine' attributes) in one hand, gold opera-glasses in the other. Behind her, in the shadows, dressed in austere masculine costume, face half-obscured by his opera-glasses, is her companion who looks up intently, perhaps, as was the custom, towards the occupants of another opera box. It was usual for men to be positioned behind their female companions on occasions like this. Both the demands of gallantry and discretion made this appropriate. Women were thereby assured the best view and men, from their half-secluded positions, could discreetly survey the audience while their standing and social status was confirmed by the *toilette* and overall appearance of their women-folk. It was this arrangement that became a standard convention in representations of this subject, offering the artist a suitable modern-life subject both in setting and in the sexual roles deemed characteristic of modern urban culture (see Plates 205 and 206). In *La Loge*, the male figure acts as a foil to the dominant presence of the woman. His action, the twist of his body and the gesture of his hand (forming a framing edge to the overall triangular composition and echoing the inner triangle which her body itself forms) set off her implacable stillness. It is the woman who takes up the bulk of the picture and it is she who is the focus for the viewer.

La Loge could be said, metaphorically, to stage socially legitimated forms of 'looking' and thereby to reinforce traditional relations of spectatorship, not only between the man and woman as represented in the painting but between the projected viewer outside of the image and the painting itself. No one in the image seems to step out of line and lay claim to 'unnatural' forms of behaviour. There is neither a transgressive usurping of power here within the image, nor a radical unsettling of conventional ways of looking at paintings for the viewer. The composition is constructed to focus the viewer's attention on the face and bodice of the woman. The diagonal formed by the barrier of the *loge* is reinforced by the ermine wrap which frames the woman's left arm and falls across the shirt of the male figure to construct an enclosed space in which the highly orchestrated patterns of the woman's costume are contained. The heightening of colour in the flowers, lips, jewellery and opera-glasses invite the viewer to traverse the body of the woman (and the sumptuous surface of the painting) with an appreciative, lingering look. The face, while more carefully delineated than the costume, is not confrontational or challenging. It is as though the carefully contrived lack of focus in the woman's eyes assures the viewer of the comfort of being able to stare without being observed. What is more, the instrument by which the woman could potentially be empowered with active sight, her opera-glasses, has a primarily decorative function, both in terms of her costume and in terms of the orchestration of colour rhythms in the painting. It is the male figure within the picture who seems empowered with the right to stare and he does so by purposefully raising his opera-glasses, symbol of his possession of sight and power and a pointer to his access to 'pleasure in looking'. It is the male figure who is shown to 'act' rather than merely to 'appear'. The role of spectacle is projected onto the woman alone.

This raises the question of the relationship between the viewer outside the picture and the represented figure within it who is shown actively to look. In *La Loge* a spectator, in the form of the male figure, is pictured within the frame. But it is by no means clear whom he is meant to represent or what he is looking at. While this figure cannot be simply conflated with the viewer of the painting itself, it is tempting to suggest that he stands, metaphorically, for him. The way that looking is staged within an image can echo (or subvert, in some instances) dominant patterns of looking within the culture in which it is produced. In *La Loge*, for example, it is important to stress that it is only the male figure who is shown to be actively looking within the picture. And that very act is responsible for obscuring part of his face and denying his value as spectacle. In contrast, his companion's value lies in her availability to be looked at; this availability is in part consequent upon the unfocused, undirected looking of her eyes. While the purposive activity of looking, akin to that of the viewer's, could be argued to be represented by the figure of the man, it could not possibly be symbolized by the figure of the woman. It is possible, therefore, that the man within the picture can act as the representative of the viewer/artist who looks at the woman/painting. In such an argument, looking as a form of active engagement is represented within the painting by the male figure, who stands for looking as a masculine prerogative within late nineteenth-century French culture.

But such an analysis is surely too neat, and is fraught with problems. For one thing, it takes at face value the ostensible power relations which are staged within the image, on the one hand accepting the power encapsulated in the position of the male figure as free from anxiety, and on the other making it very difficult for us to imagine any space for a female spectator of the image. Let us start with this second objection. In the analysis of the painting which strictly demarcates the active and passive as 'masculine' and 'feminine', a very particular viewing position is constructed for the female viewer who, caught in this scenario, has few options: either she must (as Laura Mulvey has suggested in the context of the viewing conditions specific to film) identify herself with the male viewer (both viewer of the picture and, by association, the viewer in the picture), or identify with the female in the picture (Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'). The first option enables her to occupy, temporarily, the position of the masculine subject, the possessor of

Plate 205 Abel Damourette, *À l'Opéra* (*At the Opera*), 1852, engraving. Reproduced from Edmond Texier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1852, vol. 1, p.8. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

sight and the power that comes from sight (expressing thereby her repressed active aspects), but in so doing she has to transgress the boundaries of her normal 'femininity'. The second constructs her as an object of the male gaze herself, thus denying sight and power to her. She is thus rendered 'blind', incapacitatingly passive, an impossible position for a female viewer. Where, we might ask ourselves, does such an analysis place the figure of the woman artist in 1874, let alone the woman viewer, then or now?

But perhaps it is an unreflective acceptance of the scenario as staged in the painting which leads us to this impasse. To sum up: Man is enshrined as powerful possessor of the gaze, Woman as its object. In reading the painting as representing and reinforcing dominant gender roles, we are in danger of forgetting one of the crucial lessons of psychoanalysis: that the relationship of the viewer to the scene is made up of the complicated and contradictory impulses of, to use Rose's words again, 'fracture', 'partial identification', 'pleasure' and 'distrust'. If we take this lesson seriously, we cannot possibly read the painting as an unproblematic reflection of the power of the male gaze. If we accept the premises of this theoretical position, we could see the very rigid separation which the structure of the picture enforces, as disclosing an anxiety which is at the heart of the maintenance of sexual difference in modern bourgeois culture. It is as if the painting 'protests too much'. We might be lead to ask, why is the idea of man functioning explicitly as an object of display so threatening that it must be so absolutely ruled out of court in paintings like this one? Why, in the modern sexual economy, is the 'hyperspecularization' (extreme concentration on display-value) of the female subject dependent on the 'despecularization' (complete absence of display value) of the normative heterosexual male subject?[1] The attention brought to such an absolute polarization by our example, *La Loge*, suggests the possibility that it functions as a defence. In psychoanalytic terms, the argument might go that man has to defend himself against the fact that ultimately his power lies in his ability to exhibit that he is in possession of that which woman has not got, that is the penis, the token of his access to the phallus, symbol of power itself. But to

[1] K. Silverman uses these terms in another context; see *The Acoustic Mirror*, p. 24.

Plate 206 Jean Béraud, *La Loge*, watercolour, 23 x 12 cm. Private collection. Photograph by courtesy of Christie's.

draw attention to himself in this way is (in psychoanalytic language) to re-invoke castration anxiety, to point to his own vulnerability and to the tenuous relationship which this small token has to power as such. He clothes himself in the attributes of the phallus, the costume of public power, sheaths his necessary exhibitionism in scopophilia and projects the whole package of tendencies associated with display (narcissism and exhibitionism) onto Woman.

To read *La Loge* as a metaphoric acting out of this mechanism is to acknowledge the anxieties, for men and women, which it holds in fragile balance. No man can fully read himself into that powerful gazing figure (except in a moment of delusion), nor can the range of female subjectivities be contained by the image of Woman as represented here. The man's gaze, although powerful, has no reassuring object in view and the remoteness of his companion's unfocused look may serve to enshrine their isolation rather than endorse his power. To look at this painting 'as a woman' therefore, might be to recognize how it encodes dominant modes of looking, but instead of seeing the image as a bald assertion of masculine power, to acknowledge it as the cultural product of a highly fragile and tenuous masculine subjectivity. To look as a woman, then, might involve moving

between the available subjectivities on offer here, which our culture so rigidly polices as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Indeed, to look as a man might even involve a transgressive identification with the forbidden luxury of exhibitionism so apparently enjoyed by the woman in the painting.

But do such explanations as have been offered here over-emphasize a narrative reading of pictures? Do they impose upon paintings forms of interpretation which are more appropriate to realist fiction or narrative cinema than to static images? Are there special modes of looking which modern paintings demand which resist the patterns of storytelling which are among the ways in which we seek to establish meaning in the world? Do such readings fail to acknowledge that *La Loge*, as a painting which exists spatially rather than temporally, as image rather than narrative, accords as much painterly significance to the cufflink on the man's sleeve and the cord which holds back the curtain of the opera box (even if they seem less heavily loaded with 'meaning'), as the flowers or the fan? To read a painting is to acknowledge it as both a surface and an object as well as an image. A painting does not unfold in time. It is present to us in its entirety at any given moment. This implies the need for a resistance to an over-cinematic and narrativizing reading of what is crucially a static image which demands to be read synchronically rather than diachronically. Part of the interest of paintings lies in the tension between the temporal narratives that they suggest and their non-temporal nature as static images. Perhaps part of the interest of recent art-historical scholarship (feminist included) lies in the complex means by which it tries to take account, on the one hand, of the material presence of the object, with its physical identity and institutional history, while addressing on the other hand the way that the stories, myths and narratives through which our culture structures meaning, inform its identity as an image. To address one without the other may be both to misunderstand the complexity of representation and to underestimate the power it wields.

There is indeed an elaborate literature on the surfaces of Renoir's paintings which draws upon conventional gender hierarchies to make sense of the pleasures of looking at them. What is claimed in this context is that the painting of the surface, for Renoir, is as much a caressing of the woman's body as an act of depiction. Paint and colour seem to pay tribute to the voluptuous beauty of the female figure: her swollen bosom, her glistening lips, her sparkling pearls. As Lawrence Gowing rather mischievously put it:

> An artist's brush had hardly ever been so completely an organ of physical pleasure and so little of anything else as it was in Renoir's hand. Its sensate tip, an inseparable part of him, seemed positively to please itself. In the forms it caressed it awakened the life of feeling ...
> (Gowing, 'Renoir's sentiment and sense', p.31)

Robert Herbert's 'description' of *La Loge*, although a little more restrained, has similar implications. He does not quite imagine the brush as a penis but the painted surface comes close to being seen as the woman's body and the appreciative gaze of the connoisseur has decidedly phallic associations. Comparing this painting with the achievements of Titian, Velasquez and Rubens, Herbert writes:

> It has their opulence of painted surface and of rich garments, the two so closely associated that we cannot separate the one from the other. The woman's extraordinary striped garment forms a lyre shape around her bosom, which is touched with flowers and surmounted by a cascade of pearls.
> (Herbert, *Impressionism*, p.96)

For Gowing, the act of painting itself becomes analogous to a sexualized touch, for Herbert, the act of looking a kind of sensual reverie. The language of art history conflates body and surface. To describe the painting is to describe the woman. To respond to the image is to be seduced by 'her' charms. Painting and woman, in this case, become one because the fit is so easy. Surface comes to stand for flesh. The act of viewing and the act of painting function as forms of possession and mastery. In a world in which artists and

viewers are constructed as male, beautiful models as female, and paint is offered as a celebration of the senses, this painting can function simultaneously and unconsciously as the ultimate paean to surface and subject, and the ultimate reassurance to male artist and viewer. What seems to be an innocent appreciation of art and beauty participates in a subtle endorsement of a social and symbolic order which fixes the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' in traditional ways.

Renoir scholars are by no means the first to construct the act of painting as phallic and the surface of the painting as analogous to female flesh. Indeed, the tradition into which Herbert inserts Renoir is one which is redolent with such associations. He and Gowing follow in the footsteps of such venerated connoisseurs and *littérateurs* as the poet Paul Valéry who, in an essay on 'The nude', made explicit the connection between the mastery of painting and the possession of Woman:

> When Titian arranges a purely Carnal Venus, softly stretched out on purple, in all the fulness of her perfection as goddess and as subject for paint, it is obvious that for him to paint meant to caress, a conjunction of two voluptuous sensations in one supreme act in which self-mastery and mastery of his medium were identified with a masterful possession of the beauty herself, in every sense.
>
> (Valéry, 'The nude', p.48)

In such a view the woman represented is a crucial presence, but only in so far as she invokes the power and potency of the maker, or, potentially, his substitute, the viewer. We are now one step removed from the uninitiated viewer whose focus, may be more strongly on the body of the woman as represented than on the identity of the painting as painting. We are in the realm of the sophisticated modern connoisseur caught in the double bind of painting, in the tension set up between surface and subject. As we saw in Chapter 2, for the Modernist viewer, whether looking at contemporary or older paintings, the most elevated form of looking at art is one which resists a narrative reading. To be seduced by the subject-matter of a painting alone (as if it were a fragment of life) is to fall prey to vulgar sentimentalism. But the appreciation of the surface here is closely tied up with the appreciation of the woman's body: to look (like to paint) *is* to caress, to possess. The sensuous qualities of looking in which Valéry, Gowing and Herbert revel, cannot be divorced from their sexual foundations. Rather than eclipsing the 'subject' of the painting (the woman), Valéry displaces it onto the process of painting, which is the magical means by which the woman is both represented and caressed, she is both surface and subject. The act of painting (and viewing) is endowed with sexual attributes, associated not only with sight and mastery but with touch and self-assurance. In such accounts the painting as object becomes the residue of the act itself. For feminism therefore, the focus of inquiry becomes not only what the painting represents, but the way in which the very act of representation and its concomitant modes of viewing are culturally constructed as gendered.

The gendering of surface and matter as feminine, of creativity and the mastery over material as masculine is implicit in much modern writing about art. In a language in which Nature is addressed as 'she' and the artist conventionally referred to as 'he', such assumptions are never far from the surface. We do not need sculptures or paintings which depict women as passive, supine or sexually available for such gendered assumptions to be called to mind. Material alone, in its 'raw' and 'natural' state is enough to invoke the feminine and in this invocation 'woman' can be projected as both the generator of life and the harbinger of death. Even a maker of pristine, minimalist sculptures like Carl Andre draws on the dominant metaphoric underpinnings of our culture in some of his pronouncements on art. In his words:

> Wood is the mother of matter. Like all women hacked and ravaged by man, she renews herself by giving, gives herself by renewing. Wood is the bride of life in death, of death in life. She is the cool and shade and peace of the forest. She is the spark and heat, ember and

> dream of the hearth. In death her ashes sweeten our bodies and purify our earth. In her plenty is never wasteful, passion is never wanton. She never betrays us even when we are unworthy. She greets us in the morning of our birth and embraces us in the evening of our death whether dark in the chambered earth or bright in the consuming fire. O mother of matter, may we share your peace.
> (Carl Andre, *Wood*, np)

This fantasy of feminine plenitude and renewal in which the weary masculine imagination can find sustenance underpins an artistic practice in which no bodies as such are represented. All that we have is the material, processed, manipulated and managed by the artist and his assistants, and inserted into the space of the gallery. But even in such apparently neutral territory, it is still a gendered construction of the universe that gives particular significance to the act of creating. As the masculine God created the universe from the feminized earth, so the artist creates art from the materials at his disposal. The mythic biblical narrative still subtly underpins many of the structures of thought which characterize the modern period. And in this context, the mystery of creation is still conceived of in terms of traditional gender relationships. When we look at an art-work therefore, it is not only what the work overtly represents which is relevant to an analysis of the gender relations which conditioned its production. Sometimes these are present in the myths and underlying narratives through which our culture gives meaning to things. Gender figures in more than the obvious ways.

To read Renoir's *La Loge* from a feminist perspective, therefore, we might need to take account of it from a number of aspects: (1) as an image which pictures certain gender relations by staging them; (2) as an object which is produced within a culture which is institutionally gendered; (3) as the residue of an act (painting) which itself has been understood in gendered terms; and (4) as an object which is viewed by gendered subjects whose relationship to their own sexuality is fractured and unstable. There is, of course, no orthodox or unitary feminist interpretation, although there is, for feminists, a shared interest in exposing those naturalized ways of looking which may blind us (and previous viewers) to the gender implications encoded in the very fabric of a painting.

I hope that I have raised more questions than answers in these introductory speculations. At the least, I may have unsettled ready-made assumptions about the neutrality of making, consuming and writing about visual images, and established the centrality of questions of gender to an understanding of the problems of 'pleasure' and 'looking'. For some this may indeed have spoiled their 'pleasure in looking'. How often have we not heard people say plaintively, 'but I used to like that painting', after listening to a radical critique of a favourite image. For others, the pleasures of a certain kind of understanding far outweigh the supposed delights of less reflective modes of looking. An unpacking of the power relations which pictures might embody can lead to new forms of pleasure, the pleasures of ambiguity in representation, the pleasures of being unable to hold on to a unified response to pictures, the pleasures of empowerment. Whatever these pleasures are, they are themselves never innocent and always carry with them vested interests of some sort. We need now to trace a more systematic path through some of these issues and to consider their implications for the study of artists, viewers and representations.

Artists

The term 'artist' is an apparently genderless one, applying equally to men and women. But the very existence of the phrase 'woman artist' as the feminine equivalent of the word 'artist' belies its sexual neutrality. Nor does the category 'artist' mean the same thing at different historical moments or in different cultural contexts. In late nineteenth-century France there were a number of ways in which individuals could practise art, design or

craft. Each of these practices carried the associations of the institutions in which they were taught and of the gender and class positions of their producers. Hierarchies of practice existed accordingly. From the education received by boys and girls, their position within the context of the family, the social expectations placed upon them, and the roles they were taught to think were naturally theirs, there was little chance that they would grow into men and women with equal access to occupying the identity of 'artist'. Even if they were in the unusual position of having been raised in unconventional ways (even to transgress traditional gender stereotypes), they would have faced an art world and a society which was institutionally structured in gender specific ways. It was for men to discuss art and politics in the cafés of Paris, it was for women to embroider at home; it was for men to enter into the rigorous training procedures of the state-funded art schools, it was for women to enter the fashionable and expensive private academies where they could learn to become accomplished amateurs; it was for men to rise to the rigours of a competitive market, it was for women to temper their ambition in the name of feminine modesty.

The status of women artists

An acknowledgment that the identity of the artist is gendered is not new. In the nineteenth century some feminists were keen to establish that what was seen as the disparity between male and female achievements in the arts was more indicative of the relative social position of men and women than the consequence of their intrinsic qualities. As the Republican feminist Maria Deraismes put it in 1876: 'It is easily understood that the narrow and sedentary life which custom imposes on women has prevented them until now from finding any means of excelling among the best in the field of art' ('Les femmes au Salon', p.115). She accompanied this observation with a statement about the poor quality of art education offered to women, pointing to their lack of training as what had hampered them in the past. French nineteenth-century feminists were pitting themselves against the widespread belief that women were neither physically nor psychologically equipped to produce masterpieces and that this explained why no female Michelangelo had ever existed. They also had to counter the belief that this was necessarily so for the benefit of the nation and the race. Any undermining of traditional social roles, it was felt, could threaten the social order so fundamentally that the future of France would be at risk. Feminists and women artists had to contend with such typical statements as: 'Women have never produced any masterpieces in any genre ... but they have produced something greater than this: it is on their knees that honest men and honest women (and there is no greater thing in the world) are formed' (Harvard, 'Exposition de l'Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs', np).

Feminists and women artists protested vociferously at such claims, some challenging the view that women had never produced any significant artistic or literary works, others accepting this claim as true and seeking to account for it socially. Despite the intensity of such protests, little impact was made on the rapidly developing discipline of art history, which has largely constructed a canon of its accredited male geniuses. Although certain women were acknowledged to have some talent, it was impossible for women to qualify as truly great. This required genius, a quality which, in the nineteenth century, was thought to be beyond a woman's realm. According to Edmond de Goncourt, 'there are no women of genius, and ... if they manifest it, it is by some trick of nature, in the sense that they *are men*' (quoted in Uzanne, *The Modern Parisienne*, p.128). What is seen to disqualify women from possessing 'genius' is their innate lack of originality, their conservatism, their imitativeness, their emotional intensity accompanied by intellectual deficiency and the necessarily all-absorbing concerns of maternity. It has been one of the aims of feminist scholarship to uncover the gendered implications of the term 'genius' which is so central to modern conceptions of the artist.

Questions of quality

Views of appropriate social roles for men and women have changed very slowly and the assumption that women have not produced 'great art' because they are incapable of it has persisted throughout most of the twentieth century. It was this claim which became one of the central issues of a radical feminist critique in the 1970s. Linda Nochlin, like Maria Deraismes a hundred years before her, drew attention to the social and institutional conditions which hampered women's creative development ('Why have there been no great women artists?'). For Germaine Greer, writing a few years later, the absence of women from the canon is ultimate proof of the historic suppression of women's talents and potential. In her view, through having been oppressed psychically and socially, women have been unable to achieve great creative expression and have therefore not been qualified for entry into the canon (*The Obstacle Race*). For other feminists, the whole notion of a canon of great artists is a form of oppression itself as it serves to reinforce and give value to the dominant, white, male, Western 'tradition', without questioning the values by which it has been constituted and the interests it continues to serve (see Duncan, 'When greatness was a box of Wheaties', and Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*). What has been opened to question in this debate is 'greatness' itself. Feminists have revealed how this notion has been both exclusive of women and has mystified the processes by which art is produced, tied up as it is with the concepts of inspiration, genius, inexplicable talent, virility, seminality, potency, precociousness, and so on. Such concepts hide the real work which goes into producing art and misrepresent the contexts of its production (the school, the studio, the workshop), presenting creation and creativity as an inexplicable form of directed masculine energy which separates true artists from ordinary men and from all women. Indeed, this energy comes to be seen as a necessary condition for the production of significant work. A history of art centred on a history of 'great artists', in which that category remains unquestioned serves both to reflect and to reinforce traditional gender relations and to maintain a myth of artistic creativity which is couched in metaphysical terminology.

To study the woman artist is to make a stand against conventional accounts of the artist. But there are many ways in which this has been done. There are some feminists who are content to search for women artists, hidden from history, showing them to be as 'great' as men, and thereby exposing many of the prejudices against women which are reflected in the canon. Accounts of this type often lack any critical understanding of the way that the term 'greatness' has served certain gender interests and underestimate the problems involved in transposing such a term onto women's art. Other feminists, therefore, have felt as uncomfortable with such judgements of 'quality' as they have with the issue of greatness itself. They have concentrated on historical analysis of the conditions of artistic production and the explicit and implicit gendering of the identity of the artist within particular social contexts. Both the notion of the 'artist' and judgements of 'quality' are, in such analyses, seen as historically produced, continually changing and specifically gendered. For example, properties such as forcefulness, delicacy, boldness, strength, intelligence and originality, to which value is attached, may all be used to back up judgements of quality, but they are all applied in cultures where they have specifically gendered connotations. Men and women have been thought to have different access to them. To use them in relation to paintings or painters might involve drawing on their meanings in other spheres. Judgements of quality and the terms through which works are ascribed value are not neutral. They are invariably connected to gender expectations and need to be understood in these terms.

Another way of dealing with the question of 'quality' has been to replace traditional judgements of aesthetic merit with new criteria according to which certain works or certain artists may be interesting, challenging or provocative. A notion of the 'aesthetic' as the most elevated (and appropriate) mode of experiencing art is not necessarily operative in such an approach, and works can be valued for many other reasons. In analysing the

Plate 207 Rosa Bonheur, *Le Marché aux chevaux* (*The Horse Fair*), 1853, oil on canvas, 245 x 407 cm. All Rights Reserved, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 1887.

works of women artists of the past, for example, judgements of quality may be connected to an understanding of how women artists have negotiated (consciously or unconsciously) contemporary constructions of 'femininity' in specific historical periods, or to an examination of how a particular conflation of 'masculinity' and creativity may have made certain genres, the artist's self-portrait, for example, particularly difficult for women artists. An interesting or valuable painting in this context might be one that raises problems of sexuality and representation in particularly challenging ways. One can think, for example, of Rosa Bonheur's ambitious *The Horse Fair* (Plate 207), which in terms of Modernist criteria of value would be of little interest (it would not even be taken seriously in this context), but in terms of questions of gender, sexuality and representation is a fascinating case study. By virtue of its scale, subject-matter, commercial success and critical reception, it is a very important picture in the context of Second Empire Paris and provides a precedent of a woman artist who transgressed gender stereotypes (in her person and her work) and became therefore a mentor for many subsequent women artists. Valorizing this painting in this way does not necessarily mean that absolute claims of quality are being made for it. Indeed, there is much debate among art historians as to whether such claims can ever be made. Nor are timeless or universal female qualities necessarily sought in the image, although there certainly have been (and continue to be) feminists who have looked for an unchanging feminine aesthetic in art-works produced by women. In whatever way feminist art historians approach questions of value and history, all are united against the continuing defence of art history, whether implicitly or explicitly, as a celebration of the achievements of the canonical male artist.

Modern representations of the artist

Until very recently, if the standard histories of art and the displays in major art museums were to be believed, we could easily have come away with the view that no women artists worth noting have ever existed. And late nineteenth-century France would have been no exception. The paintings which have been discussed by subsequent art historians and the 'documents' or 'records' of the most 'advanced' artistic circles of this period seem to corroborate this view. Most famous among these are Fantin Latour's *Studio in the*

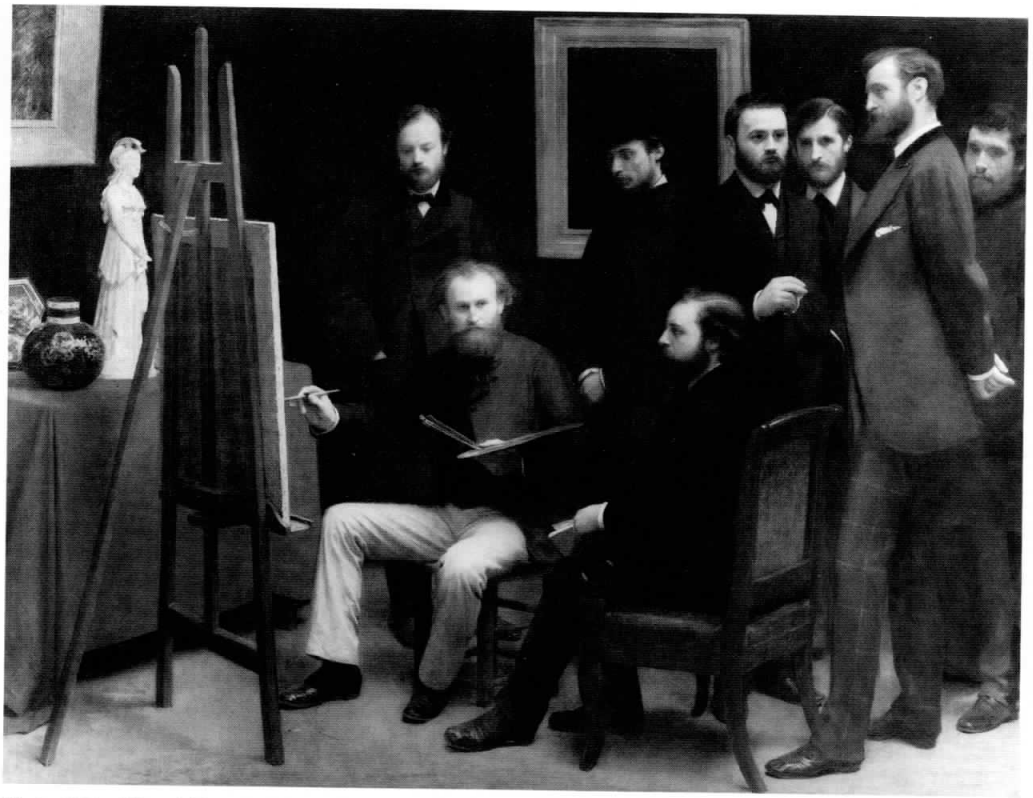

Plate 208 Henri Fantin Latour, *L'Atelier aux Batignolles* (*Studio in the Batignolles Quarter*), 1870, oil on canvas, 173 x 208 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

Batignolles Quarter (Plate 208) and Bazille's *The Artist's Studio, 9 rue de la Condamine* (Plate 209), a studio which was also situated in the Batignolles Quarter. The title of Fantin Latour's painting evokes the famous Café Guerbois located at 11 Grande Rue des Batignolles, where Manet and his friends gathered in the evenings to drink and exchange views. The people represented in the group portrait are among those who frequented the café and identified with the new theories being propounded by naturalist and realist writers and painters. For the historian of Impressionism, John Rewald, 'the friends who met at the Café Guerbois ... constituted a group, united by a common contempt for official art'. They did not constitute a school but instead were called 'Le groupe des Batignolles', and Rewald claims that it was they who formed the nucleus of progressive painting in the last years of the Second Empire and the early years of the Third Republic (*History of Impressionism*, p.205). While Rewald goes to some length to explain the absence of Degas, Cézanne and Pissarro from the portrait, the fact that it shows an all-male gathering is not mentioned. He does not deem it necessary to explain Berthe Morisot's absence, for example. Nor is there any acknowledgment that the informal gatherings in cafés were only frequented by male artists and any women present would have been waitresses, demi-mondaines, or working-class women, not women artists, drawn most often from the bourgeoisie. To find the sphere within which the woman artist circulated you would have had to look elsewhere: to the sitting room, the private studio, the formal *soirée*.

While Fantin Latour's painting is composed within the formal conventions of group portraiture, with the young acolytes, Monet, Renoir, Bazille, Zola and Astruc, among others, gathered around their mentor Manet in his studio, Bazille's contrives to create an atmosphere of an informal chance gathering of almost the same group of friends: Maitre

Plate 209 Jean-Frédéric Bazille, *L'Atelier d'artiste, 9 rue de la Condamine* (*The Artist's Studio*), 1870, oil on canvas, 98 x 129 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

plays the piano, Zola is positioned on the stairs speaking to Renoir, who is seated on the table, Manet looks at the canvas on the easel with Monet looking over his shoulder and Bazille himself is pictured with the palette in his hand. While the former painting seems positively to embrace the values of bourgeois respectability, the latter harks back to the romantic conception of the artist as a member of a marginalized sub-culture as captured in Henri Murger's 'Scènes de la vie de Bohème', first serialized between 1845–49. It would be difficult to imagine the presence of a woman artist in either of these contexts. There is no place for women artists here, either in the tradition of the self-important gathering of respectable experts in which the first painting can be situated, or in the culture of bohemia which informs the second – the meagre stove, stacked paintings, minimal furnishings and work in progress providing stock props. The presence of such objects alone are sufficient to invoke the world of the marginal male artist, as in Bazille's smaller *The Artist's Studio, rue Visconti* (Plate 210).

The absence of women from group portraits of artists calls to mind the institutional position of women artists in late nineteenth-century France. Despite the fact that many women artists exhibited their work during this period, they functioned within an art-institutional power structure that was exclusively male. Excluded from all official bodies, either by legislation or custom, they were never to be seen in formal group portraits of experts. There was no female representation on the Salon jury until 1898, no women students in the École des Beaux-Arts until 1897, no women in the prestigious Académie des Beaux-Arts throughout the nineteenth century and no women on the organizing committees of the Expositions Universelles or any important decision-making body concerned with fine art throughout this period. The position for women artists was no better

Plate 210 Jean-Frédéric Bazille, *L'Atelier d'artiste, rue Visconti, Paris* (*The Artist's Studio*), 1867, oil on canvas, 64 x 49 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Collection Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon.

in the cultural milieu of the *flâneur* (the sophisticated dandy) or in the myths and spaces of changing notions of bohemia. Such identities were premised on the mythology of masculine mobility and virility, a freedom to parade in, inhabit and peruse the city in ways which were unavailable to women of the middle and upper-middle-classes, groups from which the majority of women artists were drawn. Although the arcades and shopping passages of modern Paris were used by many wealthy women who frequented them in groups or carefully chaperoned, such access to the city was not considered by many women artists to compensate for the freedom and mobility which they felt men possessed. In the words of the painter Marie Bashkirtseff writing in 1882:

> Ah! how women are to be pitied; men are at least free. Absolute independence in everyday life, liberty to come and go, to go out, to dine at an inn or at home, to walk to the Bois or the café; this liberty is half the battle in acquiring talent, and three parts of everyday happiness.
>
> (Bashkirtseff, *Journal*, p.536)

Freedom of movement was particularly circumscribed for the single woman. Unaccompanied she risked being mistaken for a prostitute and humiliated at the hands of the morals police who regulated the numbers of women on the streets. As Jules Michelet, writing in 1859, put it:

> How many irritations for the single woman! She can hardly ever go out in the evening; she would be taken for a prostitute. There are thousands of places where only men are to be seen, and if she needs to go there on business, the men are amazed and laugh like fools. For example, if she should find herself delayed at the other end of Paris and hungry, she will not dare to enter a restaurant. She would constitute an event. She would be a spectacle. All eyes would be constantly fixed on her and she would overhear uncomplimentary and bold conjectures.
>
> (Michelet, *La Femme*, p.66)

The limited sphere in which it was appropriate for bourgeois women to circulate, therefore (the arcade, the suburban park, the private garden) was not sufficient to counter the widespread view that their movement was curtailed. Their exclusion from the public sphere was paralleled by their exclusion from the prevailing constructions of the 'Artist', represented in the paintings by Fantin-Latour and Bazille. But if there is no actual woman represented here, this is not to say that there is no representation of 'Woman' within these paintings. In the Fantin Latour she stands as a mythic classical referent, a small figure on the table but resonant with associations of 'Woman as Muse', 'Woman as abstract ideal', 'Woman' as carrier of any number of symbolic displacements (Plate 208). In the Bazille 'Woman' represents, in the pictures on the walls, both the seriousness of the artist's involvement in his work (few ambitious artists could afford to neglect the Nude), and his identification with the new naturalist aesthetic, that is the tendency to see painting as an accurate representation of the world as observed by the artist (Plate 209). The most prominent of the paintings shown in the studio are ostensibly of observed female forms, most often naked, or occasionally clothed, enshrining this serious young artist as one of a new school of painters. The uses to which the image of Woman as symbol can be put cut across conventional classical/naturalist divisions. The naturalist, no less than the classical painter may use the symbolic power of the body of Woman to define his own position in the world of artistic practice. Henri Gervex's, *Une Séance de jury de peinture* (Plate 211), for example, shows the bustle and confusion that surrounded the top-hatted members of the all-male jury as they made their decisions while workmen removed, unpacked, and brought in the entries. Against the wall behind their raised sticks and umbrellas, is the object over which they are shown to be voting, a painting of an idealized female Nude. Gervex's painting fits into the newly popular genre of 'modern-life' paintings and the very modernity of its subject-matter is underlined by its difference from the painting over

Plate 211 Henri Gervex, *Une Séance de jury de peinture* (*A Meeting of the Painting Jury*), oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

which the jury is shown to be voting. The depicted painting, with its classical conventions for the representation of the body in a remote, idealized setting, stands as a sign for the type of painting which the Gervex is not. The body of Woman, as encoded in the representation, functions as a sign which confers a particular identity on the artist himself and on the exclusively male experts. Woman's position in representation is clear: she occupies the familiar role of the muse, the art-historical referent, the allegorical figure, even the embodiment of the natural against which the cultural is defined and maintained. If women were represented as actual artists in representational groupings such as the Fantin-Latour and the Bazille, they might have disrupted the potential of the body of Woman to function as an abstract symbol.

But women were a vociferous, if marginalized, presence in the art world at this time. They may not have frequented such retrospectively heroicized sites as the Café Guerbois or attended the adjudication sessions at the Salon, nor could they easily fit into the representational conventions which were used to 'document' such events, but they certainly existed. At the time when Bazille's and Fantin Latour's 'studio portraits' were being executed, two women, Eva Gonzalès, who was a few years younger than the rest, and Berthe Morisot, the same age as Bazille, Monet and Renoir, formed part of the group of painters and critics which had gathered around Manet. Berthe Morisot had in fact been introduced to Manet by Fantin-Latour himself in 1867 or 1868 and Eva Gonzalés was working in Manet's studio, as his pupil, during this period. Gervex's painting was exhibited in the year after women artist activists had made their first bid for entry onto the Salon jury on the grounds that their interests could not possibly be represented by an all-male jury.

There were unprecedented numbers of women artists who worked professionally in late nineteenth-century France and negotiated the institutional fabric of the art world.

Plate 212 Virginie Demont-Breton, *L'Homme est en mer* (*The Man is at Sea*), 1889, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. Present whereabouts unknown, formerly in the Walker Art Gallery, Minneapolis.

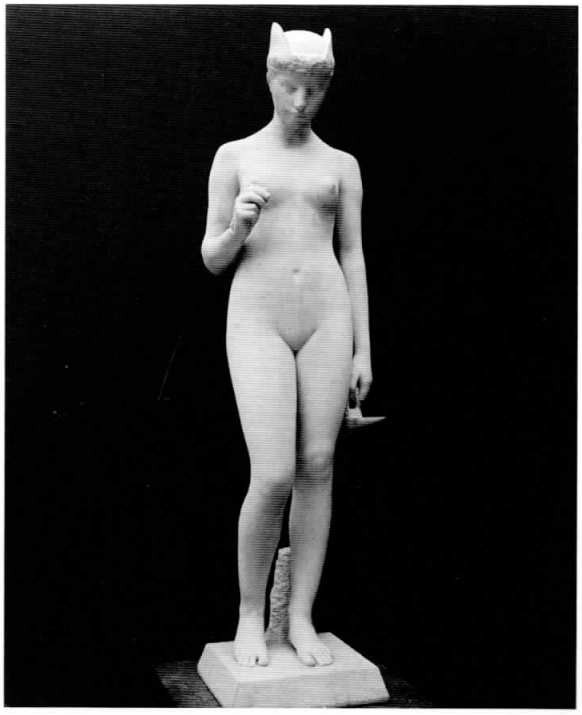

Plate 213 Hélène Bertaux, *Psyché sous l'empire du mystère* (*Psyche in the Realm of Mystery*), sculpted stone boss, Palais du Luxembourg, Paris. Photo: Giraudon.

Plate 214 Madeleine Lemaire, *Five o'clock (thé élégant dans l'atelier de l'artiste)* (*An Elegant Tea Party in the Artist's Studio*), exhibited in the Salon 1891, oil on canvas, 115 x 140 cm. Whereabouts of oil painting unknown, print in Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. Photo: Lauros-Giraudon.

There were those like Virginie Demont-Breton who aspired towards academic careers and participated in the lengthy campaign for the entry of women into the École des Beaux-Arts (Plate 212); those like Madeleine Lemaire who took advantage of the multifarious world of art dealing and the growing private exhibition structure in addition to exhibiting regularly at the Salon (Plate 214); those like Rosa Bonheur who via her dealer sold her work independently in France and abroad (Plate 207); those like Mme. Léon Bertaux who joined together with other women to form women's forums to counteract prejudice and exclusion (Plate 213); those who showed work at the Salon and women's *cercles* and salons like Eva Gonzalès or Marie Bashkirtseff (Plates 237 and 215); and those like Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot who came to favour the juryless structure of the independent Impressionist exhibitions and showed their works there (Plates 240 and 251). The woman artist, representative of the growing number of professional women, became a stock character for the caricaturist and an easy target as an image of the 'unwomanly woman' or 'naive ingenue'. The prospect of women artists confronting the naked male model especially offered ample opportunity for smutty humour in a world which seemed effectively turned upside down (Plates 216 and 217).

The diversity of the art world, with its elaborate infrastructure of private exhibition initiatives, a complex art market, as well as independent exhibition venues, allowed women to chart a professional path without state support or the freedom of movement enjoyed by men. But women still had to counteract the prevailing view (encoded in institutional exclusions, and across the discourses of criticism, science, medicine, law and morality) that a serious and professional engagement with art was beyond a true woman's capacities. If there were women who demonstrated outstanding ability in art then it was felt that they had, of necessity, to renege on their intrinsically 'feminine' attributes and thereby threatened to undermine the whole social structure on which modern France was based. If women were blessed with a refined sensibility and developed aesthetic awareness, then these were to be expressed in the suitable domestic pursuits of home-making, needlework, album-making and water-colour, nothing too exacting or ambitious, nothing