

accounts it is at the moment of consumption or reception that meaning is produced, and such meaning is consequently neither fixed nor intrinsic but changes over time and place. Renoir's *La Loge*, for example, meant something very different for its first viewers at the 'Impressionist' exhibition of 1874 than it does for its admirers in the Courtauld Institute today, irrespective of the fact that it is the same work. What then is the role of authorship and the identity of the artist in conferring meaning on the work? Does it matter who makes the work and under what conditions? Is there a way of talking about the moment of production and the agency which brought the work into being without falling back onto simple solutions which see artworks as the product of the identity, biography or stated intentions of the unique artist?

### The opera as a site of modernity

Certainly the positions from which women and men in late nineteenth-century Paris painted pictures representing the opera, with its standard visual accoutrements of woman, binoculars and evening dress, differed enormously. For men who identified with Charles Baudelaire's call for an art which represented the 'heroism of modern life', the opera offered only one of a number of scenes of urban leisure which could be seen to embody the spirit of modernity. But for women it was one of the very few such subjects to which they had access. The motifs which have come to be seen as the most significant within Impressionist iconography were unavailable to them. *La Grenouillère*, for example, offered Monet and Renoir the perfect setting for the development of an iconography of the



**Plate 233** Edgar Degas, *Danseuse dan sa loge* (*Dancer in her Dressing-room*), c. 1878, pastel, 58 x 44 cm. Private Collection. Reproduced from P.A. Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, 1946, Arts et Métiers Graphiques, volume 2.



**Plate 234** Jean-Louis Forain, *Loge d'actrice* (*The Actress's Dressing-room*), 1880, watercolour heightened with gouache, 28 x 23 cm. Private Collection, Paris.

**Plate 235** Edgar Degas, *L'Étoile (The Star)*, c. 1878, pastel, 60 x 44 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.



modern: the bustling crowds, the leisure culture, the evocation of speed and movement through broad brush strokes and textured surfaces which have come to be identified as the signs of modernity (Plates 155–60). Similarly the world of popular entertainment, the dance halls, the ballet, the open-air concerts, all of which have come to be associated with 'Impressionism' were the haunts of men and lower-class women and were not accessible to the cultivated *haute-bourgeoise* whose life was more likely to be organized around entirely different activities in the newly developing suburbs of Paris. The opera, therefore, occupies a special place in women artists' iconography of the modern, for here was an environment which they could inhabit without embarrassment, but which also offered a glimpse of the world of urban spectacle to which they had, at best, an uneasy relationship. Certainly, they were not free to wander in its recesses and explore, unobserved, its hidden fascinations. That was the prerogative of men. The eroticized spaces of the *coulisses* (the wings), open to wealthy men who paid their subscriptions to the opera house, or the sexually charged atmosphere of the actresses' dressing rooms were not the arena of the bourgeois woman (Plates 233, 234 and 235). It was the public face of the opera house which provided the spectacle for the woman artist, caught inevitably between her identity as woman, who provides the spectacle, and her identity as artist, who surveys it.

Perhaps something of the complexity of the woman artist's relationship to the opera is captured in a contemporary cover of the fashionable *Gazette des femmes*, aimed at the bourgeois woman (Plate 236). In a number of small vignettes a range of legitimate social

opera  
speed play  
for

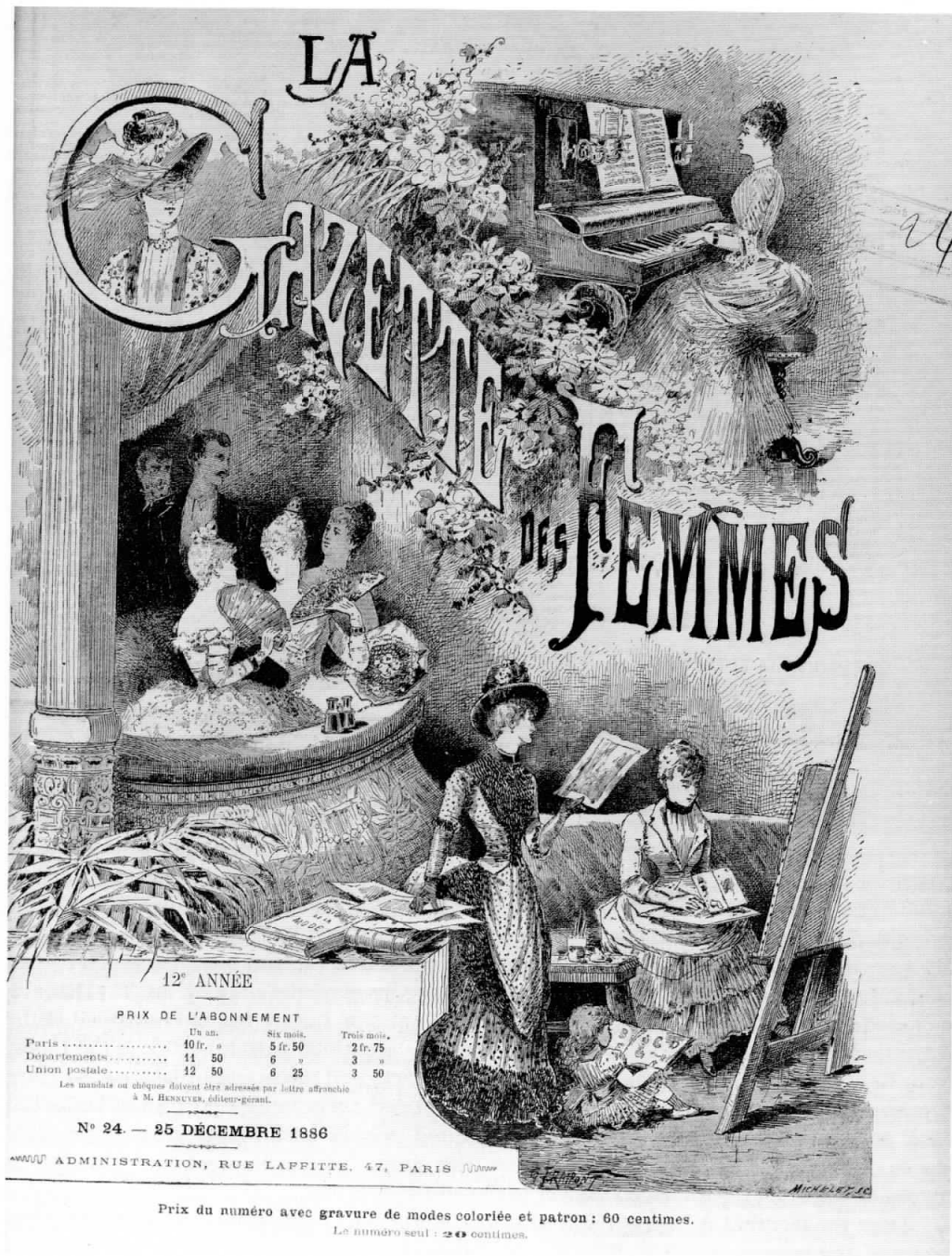


Plate 236 Cover of *Gazette des femmes*, 24–25 December, 1886. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

activities for women is represented. Her musical accomplishment is endorsed, her position at the front of the opera box, replete with the stock props of fan, flowers, binoculars and chaperoning menfolk situated behind, is reinforced, and her realm as an artist is circumscribed within the comfortable domestic interior, the easel existing in the same sphere as the child with her letters. For a woman to attend the opera was perfectly acceptable, but for a woman to paint the opera was to cross boundaries, those between public and private and those between the act of looking and being looked at.

Renoir's *La Loge*, as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, could be read as an elaborate staging of gendered access to looking, a drama which encoded in its compositional structure and in the manner in which it positioned its projected viewer, the privileging of the masculine as the representation of active subjectivity. In the context of our discussion of the relationship of authorship to gender, what do we make of Eva Gonzalès' exactly contemporary *A Loge at the Théâtre des Italiens* in which an analogous scenario is staged (Plate 237)? One contemporary critic, rather overstating the power relations staged here, compared its characters to actors in a puppet theatre in which the husband holds the traditional stick and is ready to thrash his crumbling companion (P. Burty quoted in Bayle, 'Eva Gonzalès', p.115). The point is that the almost caricatural (a word used at the time) playing out of conventional roles represented here, did not go unnoticed by contemporary viewers. In this painting of a luxurious private opera box, the fashionable young woman is placed at the centre of the canvas in sumptuous décolletage, accompanied by flowers, jewels and binoculars in hand, with a soberly attired companion, this time looking towards her. On her right is the bouquet of flowers which was to form one of the stock images in subsequent paintings on this theme but which in 1874 (the year this painting was first submitted and then rejected from the Salon) was associated by critics with her teacher Manet's scandalous bouquet in *Olympia* (Plate 14). It stood in that earlier painting as a symbol of offering, on one level a homage to the prostitute from an absent male admirer, on another a legitimate, if coded, way of symbolizing a woman's genitals, that which was truly on sale in prostitution and yet was so assertively hidden by the insistent, covering hand of the Nude. If the woman's genitals needed to be displaced in order to be represented and if flowers offered the perfect solution (with their vaginal shape, connotations of deflowering (*déflorer*) and easily recognized reference to femininity), then their presence in Manet's *Olympia* is understandable. But this also means that flowers, so refined and ubiquitous a reference to the feminine, could potentially signal woman's sex and so go over the edge of respectability. Small wonder therefore that a work by Gonzalès which included an analogous bouquet would trigger off associations with the most infamous of Manet's works. The respectability of Gonzalès' model could not be guaranteed. Contemporary critics complained that 'honest women' were frightened to be seen in opera boxes for fear of being mistaken for demi-mondaines (Jules Claretie, *L'Opinion nationale*, 1867). The association with *Olympia* is, therefore, not far-fetched. Gonzalès after all submitted the painting in 1874 as the pupil of Manet and Chaplin (her earliest teacher) and her association with the former was constantly remarked upon, and often lamented by her contemporaries. The relationship with Manet is here invoked not only by the fact that she included his name under her own in her Salon submission but in that she remained faithful to those formal characteristics which had become identified with his work of the 1860s: front lighting, absence of tonal gradation, use of black, and sweeping brushstrokes. They functioned as the sign of her mentor, who had exhibited a memorable portrait of her at the easel only four years before and who was reputed to have been involved with the early stages of planning this work. Small wonder, therefore, that the bouquet could not fail to invoke *Olympia* for the informed viewer in the 1870s.

Does the fact that *A Loge at the Théâtre des Italiens* was painted by a woman make the bouquet any more scandalous than it would have been had the work been painted by a man? This is difficult to answer. Suffice it to say that the painting is about display on two levels, one legitimate if threatening, the other transgressive. The legitimate staging of the feminine as display in this painting is, as we have seen, equally if not more strongly articulated than in *La Loge*. There are surely few paintings that more neatly encapsulate the notion of man as the bearer of the look, woman as its object, than this one. Even though the gaze of the woman is directed at the potential viewer, there is nothing challenging or disquieting about it. An image of luxurious seductive femininity is proffered both to the man within the frame and to the viewer outside the picture. But the more problematic display which is evident here is the display of the woman artist's talents in the public

Flowers =  
 ♀ sex (vagina)





**Plate 237** Eva Gonzalès, *A Loge at the Théâtre des Italiens*, c.1874, oil on canvas, 98 x 130 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

arena of the Salon: the woman who puts herself forward for public judgement as artist rather than as delectable object. *A Loge at the Théâtre des Italiens* was, by any standards, an ambitious painting, its 98 x 130 cm far outstripping the customary measurements of genre painting which women had traditionally practised. As such, it was a large statement which not only (like Manet's paintings of the 1860s) subverted contemporary notions about scale and subject-matter (big paintings were suited to heroic subjects and lofty idealism, not to paintings of contemporary life), but also conventional attitudes to women's pictorial aspirations. Small-scale genre painting was more easily tolerated in a woman than large-scale modern life painting. As Philippe Burty remarked when the painting was eventually exhibited in 1879 under the married name of the artist, Mme. Henri Guérard, the skill and power demonstrated here, were surprising for a woman (quoted in Bayle, 'Eva Gonzalès', p.115). *A Loge at the Théâtre des Italiens* was doubly transgressive therefore. The bouquet in the painting could have triggered off anxiety about the display of femininity which goes beyond legitimate boundaries, whether bringing to mind the fictive empowerment of a prostitute who reigns, goddess-like, in her boudoir, or of the usurping of public space and public spectacle by an ambitious woman artist who manipulates standard gender relations to effect, almost threatening to unseat them by staging them so conclusively from her position as the woman who looks rather than the woman who is looked at. Both the prostitute and the woman artist are endowed with knowledge, a knowledge which sees and tells social relations as they are. Both are therefore, in their different ways, dangerous.

For an ambitious young woman artist like Gonzalès, it was existing pictorial conventions which needed to be 'mastered' and struggled over. There was no elaborated or valorized 'feminine' tradition operative within the public sphere into which she could insert herself, if she had felt the need. For women artists there were no precedents for representing urban leisure. By undertaking a 'modern life' painting of this type, Gonzalès had to work with available conventions and enter into a representational system in which pleasure, luxury and sensual indulgence were expressed through the display of women's bodies. For a woman to lay claim to the public sphere and make sense (even enjoy some success) within it, meant to employ a masculine language, an already elaborated system of symbols through which the identity of men and women was constructed. There was little space within this dispensation for the development of an alternative feminine language. There was only 'femininity' as the other side of masculinity, as the representation of its fantasies and fears, the projection of its desires. To paint within urban avant-garde culture meant the immersion of the self in pictorial conventions which were already established and which conditioned the very act of making. The woman artist in such circumstances occupies a complicated position in relation to her work. On the one hand she absorbs existing conventions of representation/language and they speak through her like a ventriloquist's dummy. She enacts the language available to her. She is produced by it. On the other hand, she is not entirely subject to it but must negotiate its tenets from her position as a woman. Sometimes this might entail mimicking its dominant structures, echoing its existing power relations, but always at some distance; there is always a gap between the woman who acts and the action which is wrought from her. Even when a woman seems most to rehearse conventional modes of behaviour, as Gonzalès does in *A Loge at the Théâtre des Italiens*, she cannot be entirely identified with the construction of the feminine which she is representing because she is the artist, she is outside the image; it is she who has made it. Implicated by it she may well be, but identical with it she cannot possibly be. To talk about authorship and agency in this context is to imagine a position outside of the painting from which it is capable of being produced. That position can be imagined as an effect of representation, a product of the image that we confront, rather than as a point of origin for the image. The authorship of the image is in some way part of what is represented in it and what we see as represented in it may depend to some extent on the construction of an imaginary author for it. While this is equally true for works produced by men and women, it matters to our interpretation of the work whether we imagine its author to be a man or a woman. Our reading of the work may depend on this.

### Mary Cassatt

Gonzalès' practice was not the only way of negotiating the representation of modernity from the position of the woman artist in this circle. Indeed, Cassatt and Morisot found different ways of working as women artists within avant-garde culture. Like Gonzalès, Cassatt tackled the subject of the opera, producing at least eight variations on this theme. She made a copy of Renoir's second attempt at this subject, *The First Outing* (Plate 238), painted two years after *La Loge*. For an artist to copy the work of a peer demonstrates her attempt to come to terms with the genre as it was currently articulated. It was very common for artists to make copies of works by 'Old Masters' which they admired, less so for works of contemporaries. To do so involved mimicry at its most bald, in this case the mimicry of a world as seen by a man representing women. Cassatt, puts herself, temporarily, into the shoes of the male artist. It was not until 1879 that she began her own series of women in *loges*, in which she departed radically from her precursors. Most daring of these was *Woman in Black at the Opera* (Plate 239), a painting which seems to subvert the gendering of looking encoded in both *La Loge* and *A Loge at the Théâtre des Italiens* while drawing, to some extent, on the compositional arrangement of *The First Outing*. From the

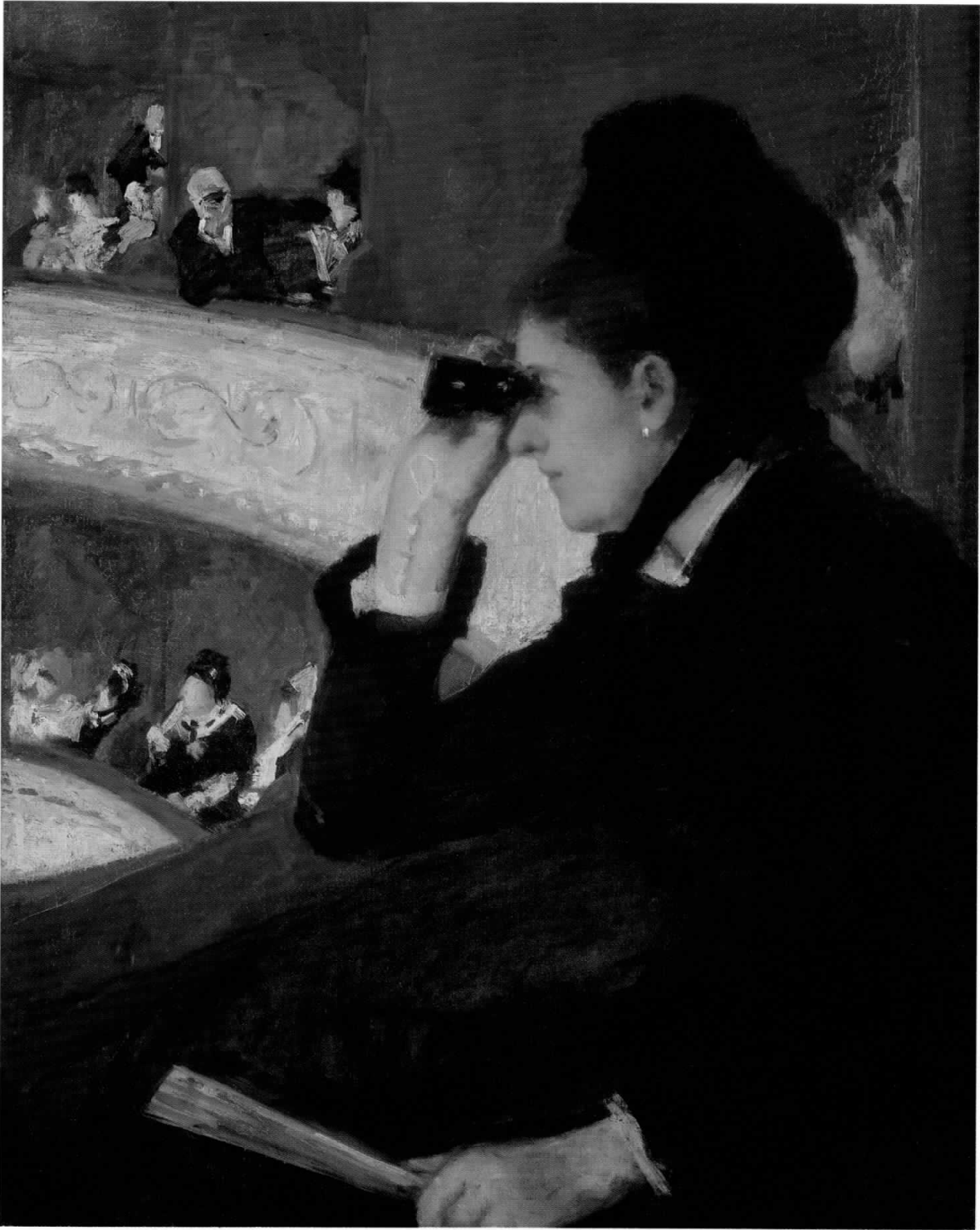


**Plate 238** Auguste Renoir, *La Première Sortie* (*The First Outing*), 1876, oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm. The National Gallery, London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees.

latter Cassatt seems to have taken the idea of the demure clothing and profile position of her model but instead of capturing the poised expectation of youth and accompanying the day costume with frills, pretty bonnet and flowers, she eschews all such decorative paraphernalia and represents a single mature woman in the *loge*, austere clad in black with white trimmings, usually the costume associated with men during this period. Like the young women in *The First Outing*, the body of Cassatt's figure is averted from the viewer, but instead of offering the viewer a soft fleshy profile and half-opened lips, her eyes (traditionally associated with seduction) are masked by the binoculars which empower her with active vision. Her body is tense and alert, her fan clasped tightly shut, her expression intent. None of these are the signs associated with luxurious seduction which 'women on display' were meant to embody and for which painting had invented an elaborate sign language. The unrelieved black costume hides the contours of the body. The textured surface and subtle tonal modelling of *The First Outing*, revealing the curvaceous body of the young girl, is refused in favour of a flat, scrubbed surface which seems to deny the body that it represents rather than invite the eye to dwell on it. The space of the canvas is commanded by the dominating silhouette of the woman whose projected gaze traverses the cavernous space before her. In the background, in what is tempting to read as a parody of conventional gendered 'looking', a man is seen to lean forward in his box and look intently through his own binoculars into the *loge* in the foreground.

The fascination of *A Woman in Black at the Opera* is the consummate and knowing way in which it seems to subvert dominant gender roles. The distance between the woman artist and the woman represented does not seem nearly as great as in the case of Gonzalès' painting. The representation of an active, gazing woman in the painting seems easily to stand for the position of the defiant woman artist who refuses to occupy the conventional position as spectacle and looks intently for herself (even though she still functions as specular object for the man in the picture). It is not surprising therefore that some feminists have looked to this image as one of empowerment and dignity with which they can identify. It is important to acknowledge, however, that Cassatt was capable, at other moments, of painting pictures which seem, on first acquaintance, to have much more in common with conventional representations of women as spectacle. *Lydia Seated in a Loge, Wearing a Pearl Necklace* (Plate 240) is worth looking at from this point of view. In this painting the body of the woman (Cassatt's sister) is pushed forward in the shallow space, the sense of context being provided by the elaborate reflection which fills up half of the picture surface. The surroundings which explain her situation are provided only as a flattened image, an illusory space which envelops her, not as a space which she surveys and commands as in *A Woman in Black at the Opera*. Whereas in the latter the viewer is invited to look with the woman across the empty space, in the former, it is the figure of Lydia who attracts our attention and on whom our gaze dwells. The rhythms created by the horizontal bands of the *loges* behind her, the echoing presence of her reflection, the highly individualized features of the face and the enveloping redness of the seat draw the eye back to the figure. There is little anonymous or generic about this figure. It was, after all, exhibited at the fourth Impressionist exhibition in 1879 as the portrait of a particular individual who is named in the title. Granted she may have all the attributes of refined upper-middle-class femininity, indicated in dress, demeanour and setting, but she also shows the particularity of a person in possession of a mind with her animated expression, intent look and erect head. This particularity locks the painting into an anecdotalism and specificity which runs counter both to the overall painterliness of its surface and its ambition as a generic modern-life painting. This tension is a telling indicator of the complex situation of its production. As a portrait of a loved relative, it is more than the representation of a type, as the painting of spectacular femininity it fits into the genre which spawned it. Its awkwardness lies in the irreconcilability of these modes.





**Plate 239** Mary Cassatt, *Woman in Black at the Opera*, 1879, oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Charles Henry Hayden Fund.



**Plate 240** Mary Cassatt, *Lydia Seated in a Loge, Wearing a Pearl Necklace*, 1879, oil on canvas, 80 x 58 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bequest of Charlotte Dorrance Wright 1978.1.5.

In both these paintings Cassatt departs from conventional representations of women in public spaces as the repository of masculine desire. Her complete refusal of woman as spectacle in *A Woman in Black at the Opera* makes this a more confident statement than the ambivalent *Lydia Seated in a Loge*, but both seek to seize for their female protagonists an active engaged look, a knowing, desiring gaze. There is evident difficulty in attempting this within a representational system which positions men and women in relation to the gaze in particularly circumscribed ways. In a culture in which the truly womanly woman is one who is gazed upon and who must adorn herself for this purpose, how can a woman artist seize the act of looking not only for herself as artist but for the female figures which she represents? For a woman to look defiantly in this sexual economy usually brought to mind the horrific and destructive image of the *femme fatale*. Even the enigmatic gaze of Manet's *Olympia* or the emphatic dark-eyed stare of Berthe Morisot in *Le Balcon* (Plate 223) invoked such fears in their first viewers. It was difficult therefore to imagine a woman who looked assertively without being seen to threaten the social and sexual order, held always in fragile balance. But within realist and naturalist circles, looking, observing, recording, were the crucial catchwords. The woman artist who identified with this aesthetic had to look in order to create, and in representing women she had to represent their relation to dominant relations of looking, that is to the gaze.

### Images of motherhood

Moving from *A Woman in Black at the Opera* as a painting which invokes the empowerment of the female gaze, Griselda Pollock has interpreted Cassatt's paintings of mothers and children as inscribing the desiring gaze of the mother, a representation of an active feminized eroticism outside of masculine objectification (Pollock, 'The gaze and the look'). A comparison between Cassatt's *Mother about to Wash her Sleepy Child* (Plate 241) and Renoir's, *Maternité* (Plate 242) indicates their very different approaches to the theme. In the Cassatt the interlocking gazes of mother and child and the circular enclosing form which their bodies make constructs an image of engaged intimacy. In the Renoir, the focal points are the exposed breast of the woman and the sex of the male child, and these construct the act of breast-feeding as a form of erotic display. The woman's pouting expression and her turning away from the child to an imagined encounter with a viewer situate the painting within acceptable conventions of erotic representation which position women as the object of male sexual fantasy. It is a very different construction of sexuality which is represented in the Cassatt. The erotic charge of the picture is in the physical engagement of the mother and child. It is in the conventional role of mother that a legitimately powerful and desiring gaze is ascribed to women. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Cassatt's paintings of mothers and children were among her most admired works. They inspired the critic Huysmans to enthuse:

... Woman alone is capable of painting childhood. There is a particular feeling which a man does not know how to render; unless he is singularly sensitive and delicate, his fingers are too big not to leave clumsy and brutal marks; only the woman can pose the child, dress it, pin it without pricking it.

(quoted in Mathews, *Mary Cassatt and the Modern Madonna*, p.65)

How ironic that it is the childless, independent and successful artist, Mary Cassatt, who is ascribed with an essential maternal empathy for her models. The issue of the woman artist's identification with the model which Huysmans saw as the clue to her success is much more complex than he could possibly have imagined. To paint as a woman and to caress as a mother were not the same thing, although the woman artist may indeed have been in a better social position to observe motherhood than her middle-class male contemporaries. There were necessarily fewer barriers between her and her models because of her familiarity with the nursery.



**Plate 241** Mary Cassatt, *Mother about to Wash her Sleepy Child*, 1880, oil on canvas, 100 x 66 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Bequest of Mrs Fred Hathaway Bixby M.62.8.14.



**Plate 242** Auguste Renoir, *Maternité, ou femme allaitant son enfant* (*Maternity, or Woman Nursing her Child*), 1885, oil on canvas, 74 x 53 cm. Private Collection. (Sitters are Aline Charigot, whom Renoir married in 1890 and Pierre, their son.)

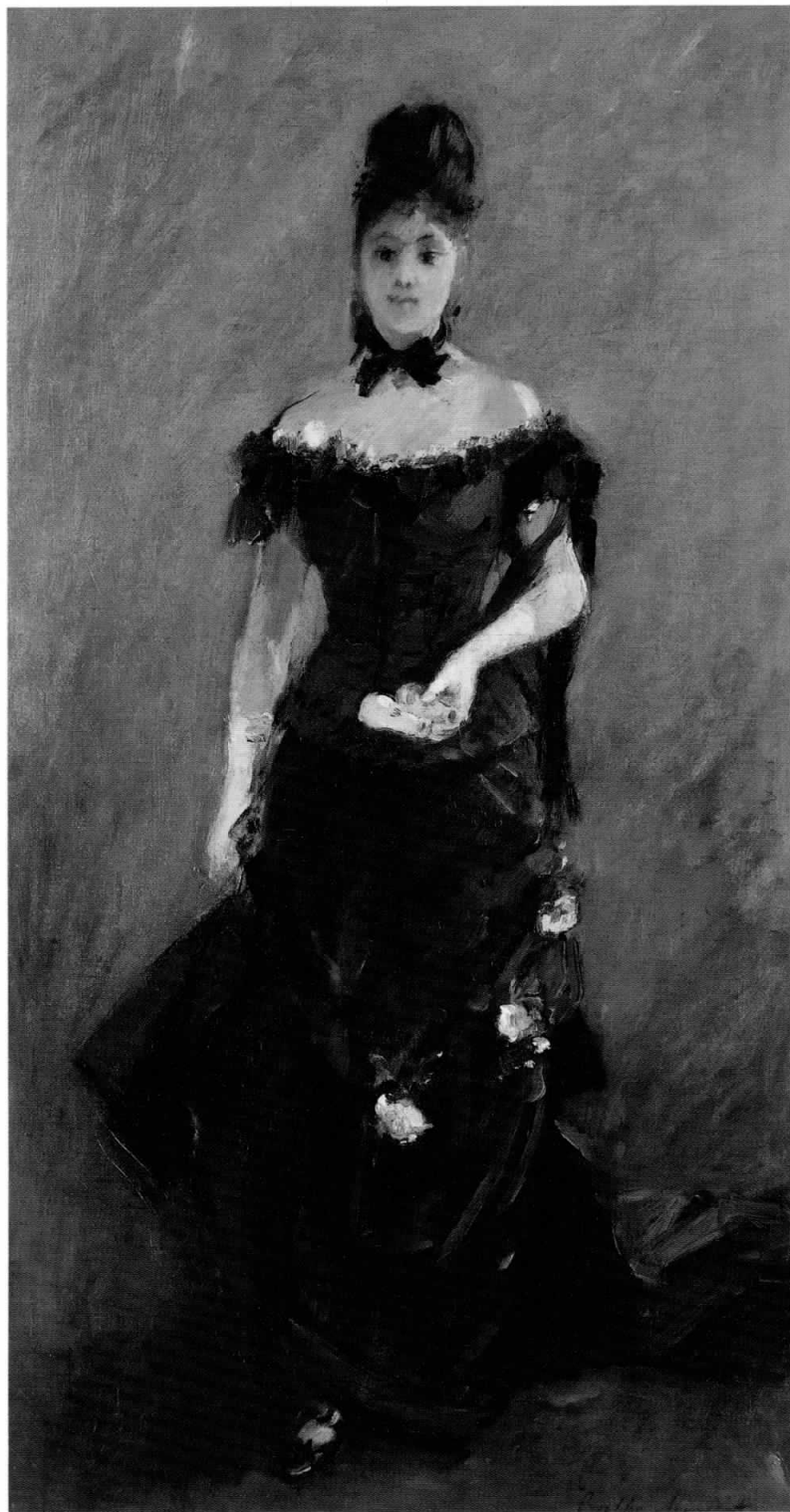
Here she was indeed empowered to look herself, and to represent the female look in its socially legitimated domain. But how do we respond to an independent woman's pictorial practice whose articulation of women's power is located right in the heart of the family – the site, it has been argued, of women's deepest exploitation in the modern period? Is there a way of claiming the power of motherhood for women, of acknowledging its force and proclaiming its significance, without reinforcing patriarchal ideology which projects motherhood as the only legitimate form of fulfilment for women? Even Cassatt, who was a feminist activist and successful artist, was reputed to have said towards the end of her life, 'After all a woman's vocation in life is to bear children' (quoted in Bullard, *Mary Cassatt, Oils and Pastels*). How literally should we read this statement and of what is it symptomatic? If the 'woman in black at the opera' has seized the gaze only to claim it for maternal desire, then the latter must surely stand as a *metaphor* for female empowerment rather than as a literal validation of motherhood as women's only empowering option. After all, the woman who paints, in this instance, is not a mother, and the gap between the woman artist and the image of maternal power which she constructs sets up an interesting tension between culturally endorsed representations of female power and a relatively transgressive social act, the childless woman who paints for public exhibition.

Morisot's *The Wet Nurse* (Plate 5) sets up different but equally interesting tensions, inflected here by class. In this image, what appears to be a *maternité* scene, conforming to the traditional compositional structure of the 'madonna and child' theme, is in fact an image of work.<sup>3</sup> Morisot's daughter is nursed by the hired 'wet nurse' while her mother paints the scene. The two women at work commune, in a sense, over the body of the child and the presence of the breast. But each takes her position in the world according to the expectations of her class and the demands of her situation. In a very strong sense they share the child. It has been brought into the world and is sustained by their bodies. But while the one woman is a paid servant who doubles up as a model, the other is the natural mother whose position as an artist in this instance is, ironically, conditional on her physical detachment from her child. To paint motherhood for Morisot and Cassatt, therefore, meant to be protected from its demands, either through being childless or being of a class which relegated childcare to hired help. These situations provided both the time and detachment which professional aspirations required.

### Modernity and the domestic sphere

Morisot's response to the spectacle of urban modernity was to turn her back on it. Drawing much more from the traditional iconography of women's culture in the private sphere (mothers, children, domestic scenes), an imagery which had been amply elaborated in the albums, watercolours and sketches with which many *haute-bourgeois* women had traditionally been engaged, she never represented the bustling crowds of Paris or the fashionable opera. Instead in Morisot's work we see the occasional staging of the culture of Parisian entertainment and spectacle as a ritual of 'dressing-up'. In *Figure of A Woman (Before the Theatre)* begun in the year after the appearance of *La Loge* at the first Impressionist exhibition, which Morisot had been involved in organizing, we see all the paraphernalia of the visit to the theatre/opera but without the setting (Plate 243). Instead, the figure floats in an undifferentiated space in which floor and ground merge in a haze of thinly applied grey paint. The body of the woman with its elaborate evening gown, gloves, glasses and appended flowers is suggestion enough of the context for Morisot. In such paintings as this one and *At the Ball* (Plate 244), set in the Morisot home in the Rue Franklin, Passy, one of the wealthy suburbs to the west of the city centre, the allusion to urban pleasures in the city of spectacle is encoded in costume, accessories and title alone.

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting discussion of this work see L. Nochlin, 'Morisot's wet nurse: the construction of work and leisure in Impressionist painting', in Edelstein, *Perspectives on Morisot*, pp. 91–102.



**Plate 243** Berthe Morisot, *Figure of a Woman (Before the Theatre)*, 1875–76, oil on canvas, 57 x 31 cm. Galerie Schroder and Leisewitz, Bremen. Photograph by courtesy of Galerie Beaveau.



**Plate 244** Berthe Morisot, *Au Bal (At the Ball)*, 1875, oil on canvas, 62 x 52 cm. Musée Marmottan, Paris. Photo: Routhier/Studio Lourmel.





**Plate 245** Marie Bracquemond, *Les Trois Grâces (The Three Graces)*, 1880, oil on canvas, 137 x 88 cm. Mairie de Chemille, Maine-et-Loire.

The same is true for Marie Bracquemond's ambitious *The Three Graces* (Plate 245), a modern-life interpretation of the traditional theme, where 'modernity' resides in costume, pose and manner of execution rather than in setting. The focus of Morisot's life and art was the quiet surroundings of her suburban home, its adjacent parks and views, and the family, friends and employees who inhabited this secluded life with her. Artists and writers would be invited into this world at the formal soirées held in the family residence. It was the salon and the studio which was the context for discussion about art, not the café or club frequented by her male colleagues. Morisot differed, in both background and social position, from Gonzalès, the daughter of a writer-father and musician-mother who was raised in an artistic milieu, and Cassatt, an unmarried woman, the outsider with her prosperous Philadelphia upbringing. The vantage point from which Morisot experienced the modern city was much closer to that of other upper-middle-class women than with her peers in avant-garde artistic circles. As such, the focus for her art was the rituals of bourgeois femininity, drawn from the visual culture of modernity's Other side, the home and its inhabitants. It was to the home that our *flâneur* returned after 'botanizing on the asphalt', to use Walter Benjamin's expression. It was the home of the salon, the wife, the children, so scorned by sophisticated metropolitans, which nevertheless formed the stable background for their perambulating. It was from there that they set out in the morning and to which they eventually returned. But for a woman of Morisot's class, it was *the* world, *the* centre, not the downgraded, compromised periphery of modern life. The modernity of the 'masculine' metropolis, when it features in her works, therefore, is a remote, filtered one, its very indistinctness of space and lack of specificity of setting, the result of her view from the outside (Plates 246 and 247).



**Plate 246** Berthe Morisot, *On The Balcony*, 1872, watercolour with touches of gouache over graphite on offwhite weave paper, 21 x 17 cm. Gift of Mrs Charles Netcher in memory of Charles Netcher II, 1933. Photograph © 1990, The Art Institute, Chicago. All Rights Reserved.

Let us return now to some of the questions raised earlier in this section. There is surely, to our eyes, no immediate way of telling whether a work like *Figure of a Woman* (Plate 243) was painted by a woman or a man simply by looking at it, but such information does influence our interpretation of it. Does that mean that we are bringing extraneous and irrelevant knowledge to our experience of the work? Certainly, if one subscribes to the view held by some art theorists in this century, for example Clive Bell, that in order to appreciate a work of art one needs to know nothing about its history, then such knowledge would be immaterial, irrelevant to the effect of the work, even



**Plate 247** Berthe Morisot, *View of Paris from the Trocadero*, 1872, oil on canvas, 46 x 82 cm. Collection of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, gift of Mrs Hugh N. Kirkland.

obstructive. Such a view of art gives primacy to the object itself and its capacity to move the sensitive viewer by its sheer physical properties, the way it is made, the way its forms are arranged on the surface, its manipulation of materials and its technical accomplishments. What is occluded in this view is history: the history of the object's place and function in culture, the genesis of its making and the context for which it was made; the condition which made its production possible, the initial and subsequent contexts within which it has been viewed; and its changing signification for successive viewers and in differing viewing contexts. If these questions are taken into account, then the question of whether a work was made by a man or a woman could be crucial: it could explain something about its institutional or canonical position, it could influence our reading of its imagery in the light of historical knowledge, it could affect our relative assessment of size, scale, technique and genre, it could explain something about the context in which it was initially viewed and its critical reception.

To argue for the relevance of the gender of the artist, however, is by no means a plea to see works as unproblematic expressions of their authors' selves whose fixed identity, sexual and otherwise, flows in an unmediated way into the work. To dislodge the fiction of the author as a genderless, placeless, classless being, who is conceived of as an inspired creator, the sole origin and source of the work's meaning, does not mean the removal of the historical producer of works. In this section authorship has been conceived of, on the one hand as an effect of representation, on the other as the historical, social and psychic position from which it is possible to imagine that the work is produced. Both of these conceptions posit an artist who acts to produce the work, but neither takes for granted the identity of that artist or assumes that this identity is unproblematic. Literary theorists have long claimed the 'death of the author', meaning the removal of a final, fixed referent for the meaning of the artwork. For such theorists meaning is contingent and shifting, not unitary and secure. It cannot be attributed simply to the beliefs of the author who expresses them by means of the artwork. Such theories have helped to dislodge commonsensical notions of authorship, of artists expressing themselves in their works or

communicating with their audiences in a simple one-way flow. We know now to be wary of such over-simplified theories. But this does not mean that we need to give up on the whole idea of authorship and make an irrelevance of the producer. Rather we can try to find more useful ways of describing how meaning in works relates to their authorship and how the action of producing art is socially, psychologically and historically contingent. This is particularly crucial for feminists whose claiming and affirming of female authorship has lifted the woman artist from an anonymity and invisibility to which she was relegated for years. How the identity of 'woman' and the profession of 'artist' interact is, as we have seen, complicated and nuanced. It takes into account not only who produces the work and in what context, but how that producer is positioned in relation to that which she represents. For the analysis of this relationship the gendering of authorship is crucial.

### *The historical viewer*

So far much of our discussion has centered around artists and the conditions surrounding the production of artworks. We have made many references, though, to the viewer, the viewing position and the notion that viewing may be a process affected by historical circumstances rather than a natural, genderless or universal one. The viewer or reader, rather than being seen as an empathetic absorber of the artist's message, can more usefully be seen as an historically formed subject whose responses are shaped through language and social context. A distinction needs to be made between a work's initial viewers and subsequent viewing communities. The context within which a work was intended to be shown may presuppose a certain viewing position, both physically and in terms of a set of intellectual and aesthetic predispositions. Courbet's *Origin of the World* (Plate 248), for example, commissioned by the Turkish diplomat Khalil Bey, was made for an entirely different audience from his *La Source* (Plate 249) shown at the Paris Salon. They conform to different notions of decorum in their representation of the female body, the one



**Plate 248** Gustave Courbet, *L'Origine du monde* (*The Origin of the World*), 1866, oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm. Musée Courbet, Ornans, Dépôt Provisoire.



**Plate 249** Gustave Courbet, *La Source* (*The Source*), 1868, oil on canvas, 128 x 97 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

provocative but acceptable as public display in the mixed context of the Paris Salon of the 1850s, the other an arguably pornographic work directed to a private, exclusively male world of exchange. Artists may, therefore, arrange their compositions, decide on scale, subject-matter and materials in relation to the intended viewing context of their works, and an imagined spectator for them. Some idea about the potential viewing context of a work is usually operative therefore at the moment of making, and the evidence for this may be traceable in the work. But this does not necessarily determine or circumscribe the subsequent meanings of the work. Once it enters into the public domain its potential signification shifts and alters constantly depending on the uses to which it is put, the context in which it is viewed, and the community by which it is viewed. Certain ways of looking may predominate at given historical moments, conforming to their own common-sense, their own logic and truth. Once these shift, so, necessarily, do the possible meanings attributed to cultural artefacts.

Viewing now may involve a complicated negotiation between an explicit viewing position (one informed, for example, by late twentieth-century feminist theory, or Modernist aesthetics, or psychoanalytic theory) and an attempt at being historically imaginative in order to recover something of the range of meanings that works have had for viewers over time. This might involve a recognition that the implicit gendering of the spectator informs the very structure of the picture. Such a recognition disrupts the traditional art-historical notion of a generic spectator, an ideal imaginary viewer (sophisticated, discerning and sensitive) who while apparently neuter (the masculine pronoun is regarded as generic, after all), has been conceived of in most writing as exclusively male. There is no place in such accounts for an alternative viewing position, one which asserts its difference from dominant modes of looking. *The Origin of the World*, for example, could be described in the dominant context as an 'erotic' work, without it being necessary to pose the questions, 'erotic for whom?', 'erotic from what standpoint?', 'erotic at whose expense?'

It is through the positing of a different viewing position, a symbolically feminine one, which stands outside of dominant modes of thought, that we can question the notion of the universal, genderless viewer. This may involve imagining a viewer situated in history who is 'differenced', that is capable of occupying a different viewing position from the imagined dominant one operative within a culture (and such a position could be occupied by a 'differenced' male gaze, a non-heterosexual one, for example, or a non-Western one). Or dominant views can be subjected to a differenced gaze, that is the gaze of the historian who looks from a different position and seeks to uncover the power relations at stake in representation.

### Critical reception of women's art

It is to the second of these approaches that I want to turn. I want to investigate the way that works produced by women artists in late nineteenth-century Paris were received by some of their contemporary viewers in order to uncover the assumptions about gender that were implicit in these responses. It is through the traces left by former viewers that we can reconstruct some sense of the changing signifying conditions of a work of art. These are left in a number of forms. Sometimes there are records of how works were exhibited, whether they were sold and for how much. Often the artist will leave an account of the work and its reception in journals, memoirs, letters or notes. These will constitute a form of self-narration. Responses by other viewers, family members, friends, supporters, rivals, opponents, professional critics may also be available in similar forms. All these 'responses', as constituted in language and inflected by the formal demands of their genre of writing and their construction of a projected reader, can give us a particular insight into how it was possible for a work to signify at a particular historical moment. In so doing they tell us as much about the viewer as about the work. None of them offers the complete or unquestionable truth, or *the* meaning embedded in the work (although we may find certain explanations more sympathetic or plausible than others), but all are useful to help us draw up a complex map of signification. Often it is through parallel texts, not specifically focused on artworks that a sense of a historically available range of meaning is best gauged.

The contemporary viewers who are given particular authority in art-historical accounts are art critics. Works for public exhibition were likely to generate explanatory texts of a particular sort in late nineteenth-century France. These could exist in the form of exhibition reviews, discursive articles, biographies, or casual commentaries which might appear in the hugely developed newspaper press. In addition, critics and writers published monographs, extended essays, and prefaces to exhibition catalogues. These performed an essential promotional function in an artistic community constructed more than ever before on the notion of the artist as independent professional. Art exhibitions took their place as a form of public entertainment, part of the urban spectacle which constituted metropolitan culture. The critic often functioned as the formulator of public opinion, as the figure who could 'translate' the artwork for the viewing public and was therefore crucial in the making of reputations and the generating of necessary publicity for the sale of works.

But the meanings that were placed on individual works were usually divergent and contradictory, dependent not only on the conventions of criticism, but on the ideological position of the critic. One of the standard strategies of explanation in a culture so bound up with notions of individualism was the construction of the work as symptomatic of the 'style', propensities, proclivities and preferences of its named author, who stood at the core of its meaning. Critical texts, therefore, constructed mythic accounts of individual authors as having consistent and unique characteristics, who were compared and contrasted with others. Salon reviews in fact often followed the alphabetical structure of the layout of the Salon itself so that a review proceeded like a catalogue of the works of

named individuals from A to Z. The 'author' in this context, is formulated at the moment of reception rather than inception of the artwork. This author should be distinguished from the historical agent, the actual person whose material and psychological agency produced the work. Here it is the viewer who creates the artist. This mythic textual construction can become, in subsequent writing, conflated with the actual person, whose actions become explained in relation to a mythic persona which stands in for the person and is subject to subsequent revision. The artist in this context is a fiction, a fabrication of successive viewing communities.

If meaning in late nineteenth-century critical texts is constantly related back to authorship, then the identity of the author becomes crucial and may even condition response. Contemporary viewers of the works of Morisot and Cassatt were acutely aware of their authors' sexual identity and interpretations of their works were directly influenced by this. At the same time Monet's work was never assessed by his contemporaries in relation to how it expressed his 'masculinity'. To do so overtly would have seemed ludicrous. His 'masculinity' was assumed. It was taken for granted. But when women's work was in question critics sought for *the* clue to the works' meaning in their author's femininity, which was understood as a fixed and constant identity, the product of irrefutable biological and concomitant social differences. For their initial critics and subsequent biographers, a construct 'Berthe Morisot' and another 'Mary Cassatt' were evolved and made into coherent explanatory units through which the viewing of these artists' work was mediated or filtered. Neither Morisot nor Cassatt were simply 'artists' for their earliest viewers. They were decidedly 'women artists' and it was in terms of their relationships to this category that they were judged.

It was in both subject-matter and technique that Morisot's and Cassatt's work could prompt speculation on its roots in their female identities. The most frequent adjectives used to describe work by women which was admired during this period were 'delicate', 'tender' and 'charming', each of these the qualities which were admired in women themselves. The terms in which women could be shown to succeed was in the complex balancing of an 'appropriate' femininity and an overcoming of its inherent weakness. Critics looked for the marks of femininity in the very way that women's works were constructed. For them, femininity was something that would inevitably be inscribed in the actual means of representation, not only in its objects. By examining the critical construction of Berthe Morisot, particularly in the 1890s, we will be able to focus on the gendered implication of viewing and the way that it is historically bound up with a conception of the gendered author.

### 'Scientific' attitudes to women

Art criticism was not, of course, alone in representing the world to itself in gendered terms. Indeed, it provided only one site among many for the articulation of sexual difference and would not have made sense had it not drawn upon beliefs which were deeply embedded in the culture. Where the nineteenth century differed from previous centuries was in its attempts to understand these differences through science, to prove them empirically and use such proofs as the basis for social theory. What had been a concern of religion, philosophy and common sense, became increasingly a matter for medicine, the new disciplines of psychology and social policy. Where the theologians and artists had used faith and metaphor to support their contentions, the scientists offered 'facts' and 'evidence'.

In the face of growing feminist agitation, science was used by the conservative medical and anthropological establishments to corroborate a belief in the natural hierarchy of the sexes. The overriding conclusion to which nineteenth-century scientists came was that women were not fully equipped to deal with the superior mental functions, especially abstract thought. It was in organizing thought, synthesizing material and making judge-

ments based on evidence that women and people from so called 'inferior races' were taken to be particularly stunted. Such inferiority was, it was widely believed, physiologically determined and depended on the structure, size and weight of the human brain. There were social theorists who thought that the scientists had got it all wrong, but they were ready to produce other forms of evidence based on a belief in evolutionary theory, social conditioning or simple observation to support theories of an essential difference between the sexes. While not all of these spoke of the inferiority of women to men, all were convinced of their 'difference'. It was the manner of describing this and the values placed on it that varied.

The findings of 'science' by no means remained the preserve of the experts. Medical theories pervaded everyday life in late nineteenth-century France and doctors became credible mediators between the experiments of the laboratories and the problems of society. Research findings were widely disseminated in popular scientific and general journals, often with the finer points of dispute and doubt eradicated. A general reference book like the *Grande Encyclopédie*, for example, drew heavily on current 'scientific knowledge' in its entry for *femme*, claiming that differences between men and women could be explained through anatomical and physiological factors. The origin of woman's supposed mental weakness was to be found in the structure of her brain which was described as 'less wrinkled, its convolutions ... less beautiful, less ample' than the masculine brain. The idea that women's mental capacities were necessarily stunted so that they could fulfil their maternal role was widespread. Pregnancy and menstruation were widely thought to lead to mental regression and women's generative capacities were regarded as responsible for their innate nervousness and irritability. The development of their intellectual capacities, it was feared, would lead to a deterioration in their capacity to breed and to mother effectively. Women were thought, therefore, to stop developing intellectually at the onset of puberty when their constitutions became taken over by their reproductive functions.

Women's intellectual deficiencies were supposedly compensated for by other capacities which were more highly developed in them than in men, notably the emotional and sensitive areas. Although women were intellectually weak they possessed greater *sensibilité* ('sensitiveness') than men. Together with their heightened capacities for feeling, they were believed to possess a 'more irritable nervous system than men', hence the claims, across a number of discourses, for women's 'nervousness' and 'excitability'. Some commentators thought that they had a relatively larger visceral nerve expansion than men and hence were endowed with greater visceral feeling. This allowed them to experience the world more directly through their senses, leading to a tendency to act upon impulse. Whereas in European men responses to sensory impulses were delayed, complex and deliberate, the result of cerebral reflection, in women, children and 'uncivilized races' responses were direct and immediate. Peripheral stimuli led, in these groups, to relatively immediate reactions. They shared a similar psychological make up: they had short concentration spans, were attracted indiscriminately by passing impressions, were essentially imitative, their mental actions were dependent upon external stimuli and they were highly 'emotional' and 'impulsive'. Their strengths lay in their highly developed powers of observation and perception.

### Impressionism as a 'feminine' art

Such 'truths', such commonsense beliefs, were widely held and permeated all thought, even reaching such an apparently separate sphere of discussion as art criticism. They affected its judgements of quality, its means of discrimination, its very aesthetic preferences. In an article published in *La Nouvelle Revue* in the summer of 1896, the year of the posthumous retrospective of Morisot's work, Camille Mauclair, a prominent critic, announced that Impressionism was dead. He argued that it had become history; it was an art





**Plate 250** Alfred Sisley, *Le Pont d'Argenteuil en 1872 (The Bridge at Argenteuil)*, 1872, oil on canvas, 39 x 51 cm. Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee, Gift of Mr and Mrs Hugo N. Dixon, 54. 64.

form that had lived off its own sensuality and it had died of it; it was possible now, in the 1890s, to detect on what an unsatisfactory and illusory principle it had been founded ('Le Salon de 1896', quoted in Garb, 'Berthe Morisot and the feminising of Impressionism', p.57). For Mauclair and many of his Symbolist colleagues, Impressionism was a style based on the misguided aim of restricting itself to the seizing of optical sensation alone.<sup>4</sup> A painting like Sisley's *Le Pont d'Argenteuil en 1872* (Plate 250), for example, would have been thought by Mauclair to have rejected all general underlying truths in favour of the appearance of the moment. Constructed to look like an observed scene rather than one which utilized a more lofty and imagined pictorial conception, it could be seen to rely on the meagre resources of the hand and the eye. Mauclair approved of the Impressionists' assertion of 'subjectivity' and their rejection of what he saw as old-fashioned beliefs in academic beauty, but he objected to their reliance on what he called 'realism', by which he meant their restriction of their work to the rendering of immediate experience. He claimed that while understandably avoiding the excesses of idealism, Impressionism had lapsed into crass materialism.

Although it was this view of Impressionism which became prevalent in the 1890s, Impressionism had earlier been regarded as an art form of spontaneous expression, as a means of finding the self in the execution of a painting whose very technique came to represent a vision that was direct and naive. For its supporters it could be defended in terms of its 'sincere' and 'truthful' revelation of the temperament of the artist who filtered the world of visual sensation through the physical acts of making marks on the surface. For many of its detractors, though, Impressionist painting could be construed as a thoughtless, mechanical activity, which required no exercise of the intellect or imagina-

<sup>4</sup> For an elaboration of these ideas, see T. Garb, 'Berthe Morisot and the feminising of Impressionism'.

tion, no regard to time-worn laws of pictorial construction, and involved simply the unmediated reflex recordings of sensory impulses, a practice which smacked both of decadence and superficiality. But it was Impressionism's alleged attachment to surface, its very celebration of sensory experience born of the rapid perception and notation of fleeting impressions, that was to bring it to be regarded, in the 1890s, as a practice most suited to women's temperament and character. Indeed, Mauclair himself, while denigrating Impressionism at large, called it a 'feminine art' and proclaimed its relevance for the one artist whom he saw as having been its legitimate protagonist, Berthe Morisot. In turn Impressionism's demise is traced to its allegedly 'feminine' characteristics, its dependence on sensation and superficial appearances, its physicality and its capriciousness.

While the discourse which produced this apparently seamless fit between Impressionist superficiality and women's nature attained the level of a commonplace in avant-garde circles in the 1890s, those critics who read the art press had long heard Morisot's work discussed in terms which described it as quintessentially 'feminine'. In 1877 Georges Rivière had commented on her 'charming pictures, so refined and above all so feminine'. When *Un Percher de blanchisseuses* (Plate 251) was exhibited in 1876 and *Jeune Femme en toilette de bal* (Plate 252) in 1880, the works were praised for their delicate use of brushwork, their subtlety and clarity of colour, their refinement, grace and elegance, their



**Plate 251** Berthe Morisot, *Un Percher de blanchisseuses* (*Hanging the Laundry out to Dry*), 1875, oil on canvas, 33 x 41 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon.



**Plate 252** Berthe Morisot, *Jeune Femme en toilette de bal* (Young Woman Dressed for the Ball), 1879, oil on canvas, 71 x 58 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

delightfully light touch. Her paintings were repeatedly praised for that familiar quality, their 'feminine charm'. It is true that the qualities of 'grace' and 'delicacy' were on some occasions used to describe the techniques of the male Impressionists. Alfred Sisley was even credited with a 'charming talent' and his *Le Pont d'Argenteuil en 1872* was said to show his 'taste, delicacy and tranquillity' (Plate 250). But the analysis of work by men in these terms alone was few and far between. What is more interesting than the occasional application of traditionally feminine attributes to individual male arts was the 'feminizing of Impressionism' as a whole.

The first critic to develop a sustained argument which sought to prove that Impressionism was an inately 'feminine' style was the Symbolist sympathizer, Théodor de Wyzewa, who, in an article written in March 1891, claimed that the marks made by Impressionist painters were expressive of the qualities intrinsic to women. For example, the use of bright and clear tones paralleled what he called the lightness, the fresh clarity and superficial elegance which make up a woman's vision. It was, he claimed, appropriate that women should not be concerned with the deep and intimate relationships of things, that they should see the 'universe like a gracious mobile surface, infinitely nuanced. ... Only a woman has the right rigorously to practise the Impressionist system, she alone can limit her effort to the translation of impressions'. In his introduction to the catalogue for her

first solo exhibition in 1892, Gustave Geffroy had called Morisot's a 'painting of a lived and observed reality, a delicate painting ... which is a feminine painting'. Writing in the *Revue Encyclopédique* in 1896, Roger Marx felt able to assert that 'the term Impressionism itself, announced a manner of observation and notation which is well suited to the hypersensitivity and nervousness of women' (de Wyzewa, 'Berthe Morisot'; Geffroy, *Berthe Morisot*; and Marx, 'Berthe Morisot', quoted in Garb, 'Berthe Morisot and the feminising of Impressionism', p.58).

Women artists, according to these critics, could give expression to their intrinsic natures by being Impressionists. What was particular to women was the sensitivity of their sensory perceptions, and the lack of development of their powers of abstraction. What was peculiar to Impressionism was its insistence on the recording of surface appearance alone. As such they were made for each other. Of course, particular definitions of 'Woman' and 'Impressionism' are at stake here. In the 1890s, while the Symbolists valorized the 'imagination', promoting an art of suggestion and mystery requiring sensitivity and depth on the part of its creator, there was a very different but contemporaneous resurgence of various forms of 'idealism' based on Academic reverence for an art of cognitive and rational clarity. In this context, Impressionism came to connote a relatively inadequate aesthetic model based on the filtering and recording of impressions, hastily perceived, of the outside world. While Impressionism was attacked as a serious art form from both sides, women were excluded both from Academic art institutions and from the first Symbolist exhibition group, the Salon de la Rose et Croix, formed in 1891. Interestingly, the Impressionist group shows had been one of the few independent mixed exhibition organizations to welcome women. By the 1890s, it was left to 'Woman', the graceful, delicate, charming creature, nervous in temperament, deficient in intellect, superficial in her understanding of the world, dexterous with her hands, sensitive to sensory stimuli and subjective in her responses, most legitimately to embody the current notion of what Impressionism was. In particular, the name 'Berthe Morisot' came to stand for the happy fusion of the constructions 'Woman' and 'Impressionism'.

In order for the myth of Morisot's well adjusted femininity, which expressed itself in her 'intuitive Impressionism', to be taken literally, her artistic practice had to be seen as the result of an unmediated outpouring rather than as a self-consciously adopted aesthetic credo. Implicit in much of the Morisot criticism during this period is the assumption that her painting was achieved without effort. Gustave Geffroy compared her hands to those of a magician. Her paintings were the results of 'delicious hallucinations' which allowed her quite naturally to transport her 'love of things' into an intrinsic gift for painting. Moreover her strength was said to reside in the fact that her powers of observation allowed for the intuitive filtering of the outside world through feminine eyes, which were, in the words of Georges Lecomte, uncorrupted by any learned system of rules (Lecomte, *Les Peintres impressionnistes*, quoted in Garb, 'Berthe Morisot', p.59).

Morisot's art is described as 'all womanhood – sweet and gracious, tender and wistful womanhood'. But such gifts set her apart from other women artists. She had, since the 1880s, been compared with her female contemporaries whom she was said to outstrip in 'femininity'. Rosa Bonheur's masculine attire and 'manly' subjects had long disqualified her as a woman in some quarters and even Mary Cassatt, whom Huysmans had so admired for her alleged maternal tenderness, did not quite match up to Morisot in the femininity stakes. In 1907 the critic Roger Marx was to describe Cassatt as 'that masculine American' and this judgement had more to do with technique than subject-matter, for there were certain technical practices which were regarded as manly (Marx, *Les Impressionnistes*, quoted in Garb, 'Berthe Morisot', p.59). To show excellence in them was to 'paint as a man'. Neither Cassatt nor Bonheur eschewed linearity, precision of execution or contrived compositional arrangements. Neither of them was prepared to concentrate on 'colour' at the expense of 'line'. They were both accomplished at drawing. As such they were seen to be reneging on their natural feminine attributes. If women were constitu-

tionally different from men, it followed that they should see differently and by extension make a different kind of art.

That certain kinds of mark-making and picture construction came to be seen as masculine while others were regarded as feminine in the late nineteenth century, was by no means accidental. The debates on the relative merits of drawing and colour had been couched in gendered terms since at least the seventeenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, sexual difference provided just one of many ways of conceptualizing the relative merits of drawing and colour, and seems to have operated more as a metaphor than as a literal framework for the assessment of the pictorial practices suited to men and women. By the mid-nineteenth century, drawing (*dessin*) with its connotations of linearity and reason, and the closely associated design (*dessein*), with its connotations of rational planning and the cerebral organization of the elements on the surface, were firmly gendered in the masculine, not only as metaphorical terms but as indicators of artistic practices exclusively suited to the male of the species and his supposed manner of perceiving. Colour, on the other hand, with its associations with contingency, flux, change and surface appearance was firmly grounded in the sphere of the feminine.

The gendering of formal language was most clearly expressed for late nineteenth-century students in Charles Blanc's widely used textbook, *Grammaire historique des arts du dessin* ('Historical grammar of the arts of drawing') published in 1867, with which most *fin de siècle* art critics would have been educated. Blanc proclaimed the dominance of line over colour, taking issue with the relative importance that thinkers like Diderot had attributed to colour. 'Drawing', he proclaimed, 'is the masculine sex in art, color is its feminine sex'. The importance attributed to drawing lay in the fact that it was, in his view, the basis of all three *grands arts*, architecture, sculpture and painting, whereas colour was only essential to the third. But the relationship between colour and drawing within painting itself was likened to the relationship between women and men:

The union of drawing and colour is necessary for the engendering of painting, just as is the union between man and woman for engendering humanity, but it is necessary that drawing retains a dominance over colour. If it were otherwise, painting would court its own ruin; it would be lost by colour as humanity was lost by Eve.

(Blanc, *Grammaire historique*, quoted in Garb, 'Berthe Morisot', p.61)

Colour is seen to play the feminine role in art: 'the role of sentiment; submissive to drawing as sentiment should be submissive to reason, it adds charm, expression and grace.' What is more, it must be submitted to the discipline of line if it is not to go out of control. A formal hierarchy is framed within an accepted hierarchy of gender which functions as its defence.

Where Morisot's talent was said to triumph over her misguided female contemporaries was in her intuitive translation of perception through a natural ability to draw and harmonize colour. Her work seemed, to her critics, to be untainted by a system of drawing or composition which involved the intellect. Nor did she have unseemly ambitions of exploring the imaginative and mysterious elements of colour which the Symbolists embraced. She was praised therefore for not betraying the characteristics intrinsic to her sex. By being an Impressionist, Morisot was being, truly, herself. An exemplary *haute bourgeoisie*, she came to represent, for her admirers, the acceptable female artist. In her refined person and secluded domestic lifestyle, she could be seen to embody the dignity, grace and charm which was regarded as the mark of a peculiarly French femininity. In comparison with the 'deviant' women who threatened to disturb traditional social and moral values – the 'new women', who were a focus of anxiety for numerous French commentators in the 1890s – Berthe Morisot, wife, mother and elegant hostess, could be acclaimed as a suitably womanly woman. What was more, her wholehearted identification with the Impressionist project and crucial position as one of its technical innovators,

could be seen as an expression of an intrinsically feminine vision at the very moment that women were being accused of denying their unique qualities and adopting the perverse posture of the *hommesse* (or manly female).

Against the background of feminist agitation and the proliferation of women artists who were thought mindlessly to mimic their male mentors, Morisot's apparent ability to harness the art of her time into a practice which was expressive of her 'femininity' deserved the highest praise. While many critics commented on her indebtedness to Manet, most praised her for successfully transforming his art into one of grace and charm befitting a lady of her class and background. What had on occasion been described as the robustness of Manet's technique was suitably feminized through the lightening of palette, delicacy of brushstroke, and fluidity of handling, which was the hallmark of her style. Morisot's true 'femininity', therefore, was not only seen to reside in the 'woman's world' which she pictured but, significantly, in her manner of perceiving and recording that world: 'Close the catalogue and look at the work full of freshness and delicacy, executed with the lightness of brush, a finesse which flows from a grace which is entirely feminine ... It is the poem of the modern woman, imagined and dreamed by a woman', wrote one enthusiast. Where Manet had been the painter of the modern from the dominant masculine, metropolitan viewpoint, Morisot represented its feminized opposite, contained, separate and suburban, but vibrating with the energy of a feminine sensibility which expressed itself in the very marks on the surfaces of her canvasses.

Gender figures in representation in complicated ways therefore. We are not engaged simply in collecting stories of forgotten women artists or of looking at how women or men have been represented in art in the past, although such forms of enquiry may be very productive. Gender is embedded in representation in much more fundamental and far-reaching ways than these. The division of the world into man/woman and masculine/feminine, has been one of the basic conceptual structures underlying all thought in our culture and history. It has been identified by feminists as the bedrock of patriarchal thinking. Society has been organized in relation to such divisions and nature has been invoked to defend its structures. Abstract thought has been conceptualized symbolically in terms of the masculine and its opposite the feminine. Such binary oppositions (opposites which are bound together and dependent on one another for their meaning) always serve to accord value to the first term and situate the second as its inversion, its opposite, the Other.

The viewers of Morisot's works in the 1890s were equipped with a set of current beliefs which informed their critical responses. One cannot but hear the echo of the scientific vulgarizers in the language of the art critics (and vice versa). In the popular scientific theory of the late nineteenth century, Woman was projected as a being who was not quite in control. Hysteria could be seen as the extreme expression of characteristics intrinsic to all women. Prey to her sensory impulses, Woman could become excessive, dangerous. Like 'colour', she threatened to overspill her boundaries, to corrupt the rational order of *dessin/dessein*. She needed to be disciplined, controlled by rational forces. But she could not usurp that world of reason and make it her own. To do that would have been to step outside the natural boundaries on which order and civilization was based. For the woman artist to absorb academic art theory, to aspire to *la grande peinture* (painting in the elevated genres), or to complete ambitious imaginative work based on a reverence for the spiritual, would have been laughable, even unnatural. Such work called upon capacities which women did not possess. And if they did, they would be reneging on their identities as women. They would become men.

Berthe Morisot's position within this nexus of anxieties is fascinating. A delicate balance is struck. In her, women's innate qualities are turned to the good. They are harnessed to a project which is seen as the fulfilment of her 'sex' and as unthreatening to the social order. As an Impressionist, she can fulfil both her role as artist and as woman. Only occasionally do we sense in the excessive language of her critics a fear that she will go over the

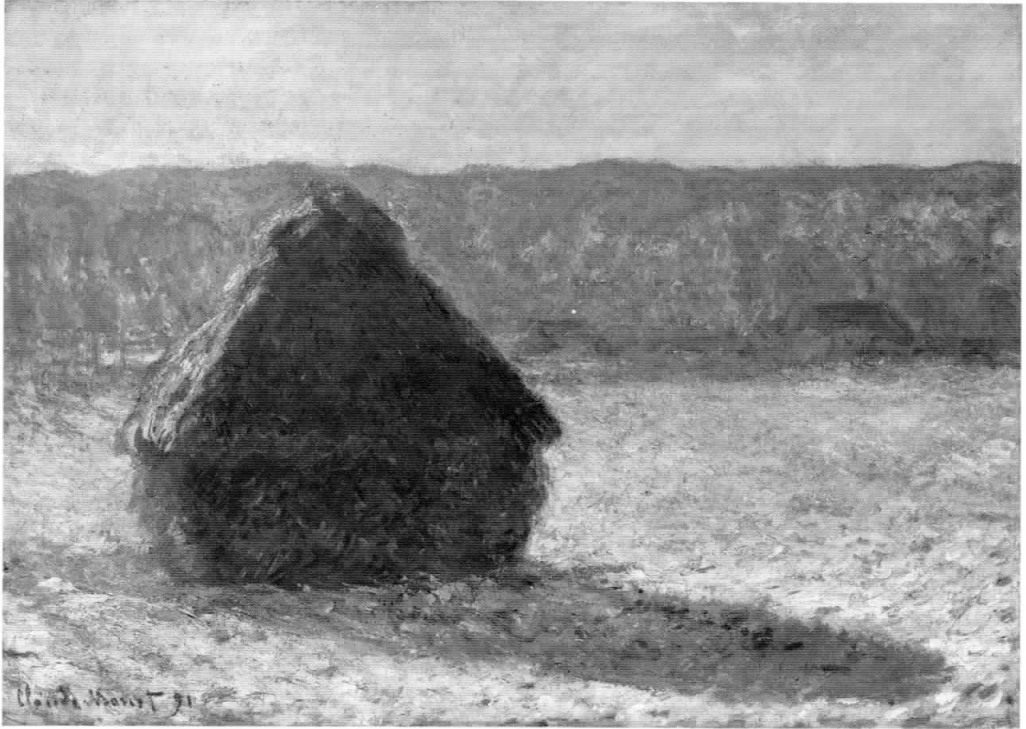
edge, that she will live out her 'femininity' too fully and become ill. One such instance was in 1883 when Huysmans described her work as possessing 'a turbulence of agitated and tense nerves', suggesting that her sketches could perhaps be described as *hysterisées* (quoted in Garb, 'Berthe Morisot', p.63). In a review of the 1876 Impressionist exhibition where Morisot exhibited *Un Percher de blanchisseuse* (Plate 251), Albert Wolff had commented that 'Her feminine grace lives amid the excesses of a frenzied mind'.

But for the most part critics in the formative 1890s saw in Morisot's work the realization of a well adjusted femininity. Hers was the kind of painting legitimate in a woman. Her painting gave stature and dignity to a way of perceiving which was different from men's. For men to practise Impressionism in this decade would have been to relinquish their powers of reason, of abstraction, of deliberate thought and planning. It would have led to an art which was weak, an 'effeminate' art. But for a woman to be an Impressionist made sense. It was tantamount to a realization of self.

That we would be hard pressed to tell the difference between some works by Morisot and Monet simply by looking at them, does not mean that they are not deeply implicated by the gender relations in which they were produced and consumed. How would we understand that a Monet such as *The Meadow* (Plate 253) could potentially be regarded within Symbolist circles as effeminate in the 1890s if we did not understand the formation of the category and its implications in relation to the greater value accorded to the masculine term. Indeed, it might have been the very discrediting of Impressionism by the 'feminine' characteristics attributed to it, together with a reaction against the emasculating



**Plate 253** Claude Monet, *Le Moisson (The Meadow)*, 1874, oil on canvas, 57 x 80 cm. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin. Photo: Jorg P. Anders.



**Plate 254** Claude Monet, *Grainstack (Snow Effect)*, 1890–91, oil on canvas, 65 x 92 cm. Gift of Misses Aimée and Rosamond Lamb in memory of Mr and Mrs Horatio A. Lamb. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

domesticity (the domestic, remember, is always associated with the feminine) of the environments in which they were intended to be shown, that led an artist like Monet to develop a practice in the 1890s which allowed for a 'heroic' presentation of his artistic self without embracing the scale of the big Salon painting (Plate 254). (This he was to do later in his monumental water-lily paintings.) Seurat had, of course, managed to do this in the 1880s with his heroic paintings of modern life represented with the detachment of pseudo-scientific precision and the harnessing of traditional rules of composition and design which has always been coded in the masculine (Plates 186–87). Seurat's highly intellectual and analytical way of working did not run any risk of being dubbed 'feminine'. And in the late 1880s and early 1890s it was Seurat's challenge which had to be met by any self-respecting painter of the 'modern'. In the years between his small Impressionist landscapes, and the grandiose personal statements focused on his water-lily garden, Monet invented a means of asserting the self through repetition and variation of set motifs. In his 'series' paintings, Monet evolved a pictorial practice which constantly invoked the moment of creation, calling to mind the Romantic tradition of the artist whose energies are pitted against the trials of Nature. Monet was thereby able to assert his protean masculine creativity, compromised by Impressionism, both in the struggle with nature which his persistent return to certain motifs invoked, and his triumph over the small, the delicate and the domestic, which his collective display in the Paris galleries of many versions of the same scene suggests. Size was compensated for by quantity, the representation of modernity by the celebration of a very modern, and exclusively masculine construction of the artist.

In this context it is useful to stress how both viewers and artists depend upon each other for their definitions of self. As art in modern Western culture is a social and public activity it addresses itself to a climate of reception which in turn feeds off current and past



artistic and critical practices for the languages it needs to make sense of practice. But this is not, as I have attempted to show, a hermetically sealed world, a world of rarified aesthetics and elevated sensation. It takes place in the world, deriving its meanings, its institutional existence and material sustenance from the world and does its own work maintaining or undermining its dominant structures. Gender takes its place as one of the central means through which the social is ordered, and sexual difference is crucial to the construction of the psyche. The relationship of the psychic and the social is negotiated through representation and it is as representation that art is inextricably caught up in the processes of differentiation through which masculinity and femininity are continually defined and redefined.