

SCHEHERAZADE AND HER SISTERS: REAL AND IDEAL WOMEN OF THE GILDED AGE

(or: GILDED AGE ART AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER)

By Bram Dijkstra

“The *Earthly Woman* (with a woman’s weakness, and a woman’s faults) seems less fair than her *Ideal Image*...the primal Eve of Paradise.”

-- Owen Meredith (i.e. Edward R. Bulwer-Lytton, 1831-1891), *After Paradise*.

“A society sprawling on materialism and wallowing in ostentatious display—what should it care for, or even know of, choiceness of taste and reverence for what is true in art?”

-- Charles H. Caffin, *The Story of American Painting* (1907), 360.

For most of Western history, men undoubtedly fantasized about “ideal images” of women far more than women bothered to idealize men. However, throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, men came to consider what they habitually identified as “the battle of the sexes,” one of the basic laws of nature. In particular, when, in the second half of the nineteenth century the theory of evolution began to take center stage in the imagination of most progressive intellectuals, this phrase came to be seen as justifying “man’s” struggle against the forces of “degeneration” (a counterforce to evolution widely thought to be generated by those women who proved unwilling to be shaped by men’s fantasies about them).

During this period of rapid economic expansion driven by what came to be seen as “the struggle for existence,” the put-upon white—and preferably Aryan—male’s striving for a qualitative racial transcendence that would match their expanding material wealth, often seemed undercut by what was seen as women’s inability to abandon a static focus on issues of practical immediacy, such as their relentless pursuit of what was delicately identified as the male’s “vital essence.” In the face of women’s inability to evolve, the production of men’s “ideal images of women” came to be seen as a necessary form of encouragement to the less “fair,” the less tractable, “earthly women,” to give up their obstructive ways and instead become “angels” of passivity and submission. In fact, during this period the “science” of eugenics, championed by a veritable horde of prominent physicians, biologists, sociologists, and psychiatrists (or “alienists,” as they

were known more commonly), all but normalized the notion that men must struggle to overcome the “inbred qualities of stasis—and even degeneration”—thought to be characteristic of the “eternal feminine.”

Even before the Gilded Age, toward the middle of the nineteenth century, British and American men in particular seem to have come to feel ever more harried by the demands placed upon them as providers within the framework of the rise of the middle classes. Goaded by what were seen as the brutal necessities of the Hobbesian marketplace, they felt called upon to acquire wealth by whatever means possible. Sarah Stickney Ellis, one of the leading “moral” voices of the period, wrote as early as 1839, that economic necessity turned “every man’s hand against his brother.” Indeed, she stressed, each striver after success, “struggling to exalt himself,” might be driven to usurp “the place of his weaker brother” and in the process find himself “trampling upon his fallen foe.” Thus, Ellis maintained, these men, their souls ravaged by economic necessity, needed to find wives so exceptionally pure and virtuous that they could serve as their husbands’ “soul keepers,” moral sponges able to absorb—and thereby absolve—the necessary everyday sins their husbands were forced to commit to provide for their wives and children.

During most of the Victorian era and the Gilded Age, this ideal of the immaculate wife whose primary function in society it was to be ready to wash away her husband’s sins with the radiant soap of her unshakable moral virtue and impeccable physical *and* mental purity, ruled British and American culture far more than it did the rest of the Western world, where more antiquated—and far looser—aristocratic ideas about gender relationships tended to continue to compete for at least the attention of the ruling classes. However, in the English-speaking world, the dominant model for ideal womanhood came to be an almost paralyzing form of passivity. Indeed, a true woman was expected to consider virtue so essential to her being that the process of guarding it would ultimately leave her exhausted and, in many cases, a virtual invalid.

Inevitably doomed to failure, such impossible demands led rapidly to their dualistic opposite. Ideals are practical impossibilities that, when couched as requirements, frequently become excuses for the brutal manipulation of those whom we see as “other.” Inevitably, by the dawn of the twentieth century, men’s attempts to turn women into goddesses of meek and compliant, hyper-pure domesticity, had begun to fall apart. This was certainly due in part to the effect of the English-speaking world’s increasingly intensive interaction with mainland Europe, where cynicism about the likelihood of uxorial purity had never waned and where, especially during the 1890s, obsessive eroticism was beginning to engulf much of official culture in the form of symbolic representations of the good, the bad, and the ugly in womanhood. Around this time, therefore, even in Britain and the United States disappointment with the inability of women in general to serve as men’s immaculate soul keepers became rampant.

Such wits of the Gilded Age as Ambrose Bierce (1842—ca. 1914) began to identify women as “the opposing, or unfair, sex.” (*The Devil’s Dictionary*) Even among those who, early in the twentieth century, proudly insisted they were supporters of women’s rights, it was common to maintain that “woman is closer to primordial nature, and is therefore more primitive than man,” as William J. Fielding, a widely read sexologist of the period put it. Though Fielding maintained that he had “no quarrel with the ultra-feminists in principle,” he was certain that, when it came to issues related to evolution “Woman” was clearly not up to male standards.

Instead “Woman” was, as the then world-famous Italian physiologist Paolo Mantegazza (1831—1910) declared categorically, “the high priestess of love.” Even so she could be dealt with in the evolutionary context, at least as long as she was willing to be both “primitive” (read “sexually eager”) and submissive to the men in her life. However, if she wanted to be more than a vessel into which men could pour their sins, many physicians of the period insisted she was likely to turn into a deadly predator: The American eugenicist William J. Robinson, M.D., warned readers of his textbook *Woman, Her Sex and Love Life* (1917) that the “hypersensual woman” in pursuit of the male’s “vital essence” should be seen as “a great danger to the health and even the very life of her husband.” Indeed, he continued, “Just as the vampire sucks the blood of its victims in their sleep while they are alive, so does the woman vampire suck the life and exhaust the vitality of her male partner—or victim.”

In using the “woman’s desire equals vampirism” analogy, Robinson was simply following orthodox medical opinion of the period, which held that semen was carried in the blood throughout the male body to give it strength, and especially to the brain to give it superior weight and volume. “Incontinent” males were therefore typically portrayed as physically weak and mentally deficient. The equation of sexually active women with vampires was thus based on the assumption that to “exhaust the vitality” of their male “victims” was, in a very real sense, to—at least metaphorically—“behead” them as well—hence the overwhelming popularity of the image of Salome during this period. The “vamps” of the movies were simply the daughters of the “vampires” of the Gilded Age.

Disturbing (as well as arousing) information of this sort was rampant among those who supplied “scientific” information to the world at large during the late nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. With “science” leading the way, artists and writers throughout Europe in particular, rushed in to portray women as either “ideal” creatures of impeccable virtue or as destructive monsters, vampires, and man-eaters. As the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821—1867) had come to insist early on, the contradictory impulses stirred up by female beauty could not fail but turn every male into a backsliding fool: “Whether you emanate from heaven or hell,” he addressed woman in his poem “Hymn to Beauty”, “matters not, you terrifying, massive monster, who are nonetheless mindlessly innocent as well!”

It was thus clear that the men of the Gilded Age had been given a perfect formula for their spiritual absolution from blame for any sexual misstep that might serve to interfere with their mandated evolutionary struggle in search of transcendent, superman status. Woman, with her perverse, primitive lack of adaptability to modernity, clearly forced men to succumb to evil, and if she refused to recognize her position of “natural inferiority” to the evolving male, she inevitably became a “monster” who caused men to slide into various cycles of “devolution.”

Though “nature has ordained that she should live under the protection of the man while she fulfills her mission in life as mother,” woman continues to be perversely unwilling to accept that she “is not man’s intellectual equal,” groused August Strindberg (1849—1912). In his autobiographical novel *The Confessions of a Fool* he declared that it was obvious that woman “is not an essential factor in the great work of civilization; this is man’s domain, for he is better fitted to grapple with spiritual problems than she is. Evolution teaches us that the greater the difference between the sexes, the stronger and more fit will be the resulting offspring. Consequently, the aping of the masculine, the equality of the sexes, means retrogression, and is utter folly, the last dream of romantic and idealistic socialism.”

During the period between 1875 and 1925, therefore, there were relatively few middle-class men, intellectuals or men of wealth and leisure, whose minds had not been addled by one or another version of this wide-spread, “scientifically sanctioned” cultural misogyny. If a woman did not allow herself to be elevated to saintly motherhood or at the very least accept to remain passive in domestic quietude, she must of necessity be a perverse, backsliding creature, an emasculating vampire determined to destroy the men around her. European artists were especially eager to show women as collectively representative of this latter phase of “degenerative” feminine behavior. By contrast Americans, during the same period, were more likely to stick with idealized images of “wholesome” female passivity or not-so-terribly-dangerous “symbolic” representations of the “inherent feminine tendency” to bring men to distraction.

Even so, the realities of life, among the vast majority of working men and women were inevitably very different from the elaborate gender fantasies spun by artists and writers serving the leisure class. Poverty was, as it always had been, a powerful equalizer of the practical realities involved in the relationships between men and women. For many centuries, women and men had worked side by side in the fields—and in the nineteenth century they were often forced to engage in similar back-breaking work under brutal factory conditions as well. Even if the dominant cultural push of the Gilded Age was to portray women as either angels or devils, there were still a good many artists who were acutely aware of the ravages of poverty—often through personal experience. Particularly

during the 1870s, before the age became truly gilded, these artists chose to portray the travails of the poor with remarkable candor.

In the pages of the London magazine *The Graphic*, such images often forced its readers to recognize the desperate conditions under which the majority of people had to live. The French painter Adrien Marie (1848—1891) was a frequent contributor to this magazine, and the fact that he exhibited his painting (*Misère*) at the Paris Salon of 1875, the year of the death of Jean-Francois Millet, its far more graphic treatment of the desperation accompanying extreme poverty than even Millet had yet been willing to portray, is an extraordinary example of this magazine's—and its artists—no-nonsense focus on social concern in the face of an art world eager for images of “ideal” beauty, or at least terminally cute “shepherd girls” and well-scrubbed and equally cute and preferably female beggars, such as William Adolphe Bouguereau (1825—1905) liked to supply to his well-heeled clients. Instead *Misery* focuses on a scene that would seem to anticipate by some twenty years the otherwise still far-more-romanticized drama of Puccini's opera *La Boheme*. Without trying to sentimentalize his portrayal, Adrien Marie here starkly portrays the actual conditions under which most working people had to live.



Adrien Marie
(French, 1848–1891)
Misère, 1875
Oil on canvas
47 x 67 1/2 inches
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

In one of his letters (no. 252), Vincent van Gogh admiringly referred to Adrien Marie as a painter motivated “to do some good,” instead of being enthralled by “material grandeur.” Marie, he said, has “some sincerity in his heart which despises all that grandeur.” It is likely that van Gogh saw *Misery* in Paris while working for the art dealer Goupil, but whether or not he did, he would have seen examples of the artist's work in *The Graphic*. In any case, paintings such as this were certainly the inspiration for such early, starkly realistic paintings of his as *The Potato Eaters*.

Misery is also fascinating as a visual commentary on the late nineteenth-century clash between leisure and labor. The unheated attic in which a possibly dying man (a luckless artist, perhaps), his wife, and three children are struggling to survive, is being visited by two luxuriously dressed young women of the leisure class, distant relatives perhaps, who are visibly shocked to encounter the dire conditions—the misery—under which this family is forced to live. The painting deliberately creates a dramatic contrast between the obvious economic ease of the two visitors and the dire poverty of those living in the garret. Also, by emphasizing the central role of the mother, who has to tend to her children as well as her ailing husband, the artist was able to represent the functional equality in social roles that was, of necessity, imposed on men and women living in poverty.

The American painter Gilbert Gaul (1855—1919), was only twenty-one in 1876, when he painted *Waiting*, his strikingly realistic and unsentimental portrait of a hardscrabble scullery maid. Defying the conventional depiction of romanticized street urchins and shoe-shine boys seemingly fully content with their lot that were the stock-in-trade of his teacher John George Brown (1831—1913), he instead showed the emotional predicament of an anything-but-idealized young woman, who has either just been fired from her position or has just arrived at a new one—the artist leaves it to the viewer to decide which is the most likely. In any case the young woman finds her life in upheaval during the most festive time of the year (signaled by the mistletoe stuck under her bonnet). We see her sitting, racked by poverty (as signaled by her torn clothes, battered shoes and her rickety footlocker, which is barely held together with leather straps), anxiously in wait of an uncertain, and potentially disastrous future.



Gilbert Gaul (1855-1919)
Waiting (1876)
Oil on canvas
22 x 28 inches
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

What is striking about these two artists' portrayals of working women is that they are highly unconventional within the context of the dominant ideological assumptions of the period during which they were made. They are directly in conflict with the dominant social conventions of the time. Imagery such as that found in these paintings, is expressive of an unusually independent conception of narrative on the part of the artists, and represents, with its determined emphasis on the emotive realities of circumstance, a distinctive critique of the manner in which female subjects were portrayed in the more typical images of the period.

This is, in fact, also true of a painting such as Walter Shirlaw's dramatic 1886 *Dawn*. Initially, one might assume that it places its female subject in a fantasy world typical of the period. After all, Shirlaw (1839—1909) painted this work only a few years after Bouguereau's equally idealized—and similarly titled—rendition of a female figure floating down toward the lily-leaf-covered surface of a pond, a painting he exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1881. Bouguereau's *L'Aurore (Dawn)* showed an elegant, and quite naked, young woman, who is presumably floating and yet held quite upright in the clear morning air. She is shown in absolutely static suspension, even as a thin gray-white, diaphanous wrap that covers only her legs and one of her arms wafts fiercely about her, agitated by an otherwise apparently non-existent wind. Her hair floats darkly around her head as she reaches over to sniff at a very long-stemmed lily, her toe almost touching the water's mirror-like surface, which, as any well-informed viewer of that period would know, represented the fluid, volatile, watery essence women were supposed to personify.



Walter Shirlaw (1838–1909)
Dawn, circa 1886
Oil on canvas
66 x 33 inches
Collection of Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Shirlaw, a newly-wed in 1881, was visiting Europe with his wife at the time of that year's Salon, and, as a working artist, he would almost certainly have wanted to attend that exhibition. If he did, he undoubtedly lingered before Bouguereau's opus, since much of what can be seen in the French master's painting can be found in Shirlaw's version as well. Yet, even so, no two paintings could be more different, either stylistically or in their impact on the viewer. Bouguereau's *Dawn*, a true tour-de-force and one of his most brilliant paintings, is as perfect, wax-polished, and finished an image as idealized neo-classically influenced pseudo-realism could be expected to have produced. Shirlaw's version, on the other hand, painted at some point between 1881 and 1886, when a sketch of it was reproduced in *The Book of American Figure Painters*, is most likely a tribute to Florence, his new wife. It is painted with a broad, agitated brush and, one is tempted to say, intense admiration for this otherwise somnolent figure.

The—presumably mythic—woman of Shirlaw's painting also floats above a lily pond, and, in fact, does so slightly more modestly swathed in diaphanous cloth. But she is a far more realistic—and realistically shaped—figure, a living being, as opposed to the waxed and polished, perfectly idealized—and hence emotionally paralyzed—female of Bouguereau's painting. Shirlaw's woman is presented in an almost casual manner. He has painted her very loosely, and, indeed, truly flamboyantly: his work is also a tour-de-force, but not of waxy perfection: instead it bristles with motion-capturing brush strokes, and is animated by what, during this period, would have been considered an almost reckless use of paint. Even the doves fluttering around this woman's head, though furiously stirring up strands of her bright orange-red hair, cannot disturb her peaceful slumber. Thus, Shirlaw's painting turns the standard comparisons between late nineteenth-century French and American mores upside down: Bouguereau's "Dawn" is neutral, static, and notwithstanding her nudity, a very distant figure, while Shirlaw's, even in her sleep, conveys to the viewer an impression of very immediate physical warmth and movement.

Shirlaw's painterly approach in this work clearly belies the often heard art-historical wisdom maintaining that, before the 1890s, Americans were able to do little in the realm of figure painting except produce slavish copies of the work of their European counterparts. Ella Ferris Pell's *Salome* also proves to be remarkably innovative. Pell (1846—1922), was an American artist working and studying in Paris in 1890, when she painted this work, which was accepted for inclusion in that year's Salon des Beaux-Arts—something of an unusual achievement, since it is quite unlike the myriad versions of *Salome* being produced by European artists at this time. The accepted manner of painting *Salome* at this time was to depict her as an evil, predatory, vampire-like creature, triumphantly carrying the head of Saint John the Baptist (the symbolic representation of his "masculine intellectual superiority") on a platter. Most of these works were to take their cue from Oscar Wilde (1854—1900), whose characterization of the ideological significance of this Biblical narrative squarely targeted her as a predator in his play *Salome* (1891). Pell, instead, chose to show her without the head, and to paint her not as

an evil creature, but rather to emphasize that behind this young woman's always so eagerly emphasized "evil nature" stood, at least as far as she was concerned, the figure of a simple—and probably indigent—model who had, most likely, only recently arrived in Paris to try to earn some money. In other words, Pell's "Salome" becomes a subversive proto-feminist statement for its time, precisely because she took the period's favorite male-constructed fantasy of a demonic female and turned it into the portrait of a real woman.



Ella Ferris Pell (1846–1922)
Salome, 1890
Oil on canvas
52 x 34 inches
Collection of Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Maximilien Colin's *Souvenirs* (1891), another painting by an American artist working in Europe, was also exhibited at the Paris Salon. Colin (1862—1894), whose real name was Maximilien Cohen, was born in Bromberg, Prussia, though he later claimed to have been born in New York City. He had emigrated with his parents to the United States in 1869, and, no doubt, adopted his French-sounding name as a ruse to give himself a better chance of having his art accepted into the Salon at a time when being Jewish in France was not without its hazards (Alfred Dreyfus, for instance, was falsely convicted there of treason in 1894). As Colin, he rapidly developed a thriving career for himself as an artist, exhibiting frequently both in the United States and in Paris, until his life was tragically cut short at 31, when he drowned in Long Island Sound somewhere south of Stamford, Connecticut, on June 22, 1894.



Maximilien Colin
(1862 - 1894)
Souvenirs, circa 1890
29" x 36 1/4"
Oil/canvas
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Colin was a brilliant painter of genre scenes in the tradition of Alfred Stevens (1828—1906) and Jacques-Joseph (James) Tissot (1836—1902), but where these painters were celebrated for their paintings of women of wealth busily being wealthy in luxurious interiors or in public places, where they could be admired for their stylish elegance, Colin tended to focus on far more down-to-earth scenes. One of his better-known works, for instance, was titled *Visiting Day at the Hebrew Orphan Asylum*. In *Souvenirs*—which he also exhibited at the National Academy of Design in New York in 1892—he approached the otherwise at the time extremely common theme of a well-to-do woman in a luxurious interior quite differently from his European contemporaries. For while they habitually emphasized these women’s life of privilege, Colin, in a quite subtle manner, points to the element of isolation and loneliness that often became so acute in these women’s lives that they could easily be driven to desperation.

The woman in *Souvenirs* may indeed be surrounded by the trappings of wealth and leisure, but, on closer examination we begin to realize that something is drastically awry in her life: having ceased to read the substantial tome (clearly not a flighty romance) that she is holding in her hand, she leans back to rummage through her memories, as the title tells us—or, perhaps, she is instead looking longingly toward the light shining through the veranda door in the other room. Is she contentedly ruminating about the past or actively yearning for a life of light beyond the confines of her domestic prison? Is she as contented in her role as women of her standing were assumed to be? If that were the case the typical “domestic interior with lounging woman” scene of the period would show her surrounded by a wide array of neatly organized objects symbolizing her contented existence in her world of affluence; but while this woman is clearly living in just such an

environment, the 1891 viewer would instantly have recognized that something was drastically wrong here.

Why? It is not the fact that she is an actual reader, a thinking person holding her place in a tome of considerable weight—even though that might have caused concern, for women of her class were not encouraged to think. But that would still not have been as fundamentally troubling as the fact that she is surrounded by evidences of domestic disorganization. Not only are there more books on the little round table before her, but these books, too, obviously have not just serious physical weight, but also as much intellectual content as the book she is reading—for in France, where this scene can be assumed to take place, only truly “serious” books were bound in hard covers like the one placed centrally on that table. In addition, we see under that book, not even properly folded, but quite messily draped over the edge of the table, a copy of *Le Figaro*, the kind of newspaper whose contents could only serve to poison a good woman’s mind, and make her inattentive to her proper duties. “Messy” is the key word here: it clearly identifies this woman’s state of domestic discontent. Gilded Age viewers would quickly have noted that the carpet near the piano is in disarray, partially kicked over in a way no proper wife would have tolerated. One of the piano scores has fallen onto the floor—indeed the whole area around the piano is a mess: clearly this woman is by no means as exemplary a member of the upper middle-class auxiliary brigade of sacrificial wives ready to serve as the soul keeper to her capital-accumulating husband as she was supposed to be. This woman, instead, seems lost, sad, perhaps overcome with regret—instead of being contentedly indolent and stylishly inane.

Indeed, Colin’s narrative about this woman’s domestic isolation could have been a direct illustration of the desperately constricted life Alice James (1848-1892) was being forced to live just around the time it was painted. Alice was a brilliant, intellectual woman during a time when women of the “leisure class” were considered particularly virtuous if they showed evidence of being not only meek and intellectually deficient, but also ever on the edge of physical invalidism. She had begun keeping a diary on May 31, 1889, with some telling thoughts about the prison of silence and dismissal in which she found herself living. For though she was the sister of two of America’s most prominent public intellectuals, the philosopher William and the novelist Henry James, that did not help her case, for her brothers expected her to be a proper woman of the period and never thought of her as an intellectual equal: “I think that if I get into the habit of writing a bit about what happens, or rather doesn’t happen [within my world], I may lose a little of the sense of loneliness and desolation which abides with me,” she wrote. Alice was acutely aware of her brothers’ dismissal of her as a “mere woman” and rejoiced whenever she gained their approval for any of her observations about life and society. Sadly, those instances were rare.

Jean Strouse, Alice's biographer, notes that Leon Edel, the author of a multi-volume bio of her brother Henry, saw the latter's attitude toward his sister as determined by what Edel had termed a kind of "'spiritual transvestism': [Henry] protected his sense of masculine integrity by assuming a feminine guise," (50) though he did so at the cost of Alice's independent identity. In his eyes, she needed to remain one of his famed American innocents, a model for his *Portrait of a Lady*. Thus, instead of treating her as an equal—something that would have wreaked havoc with his conception of the lives of his favorite female characters—he continued to require her to play the role of one of those innocents. Thus, in a sense, he could be said to have depredated, indeed, "vampirized" her identity in this manner for his own purposes. As Strouse points out: "His sister did not—much as she might have liked to—see herself as a frail vessel bearing the treasure of human affection through the ages. The 'female' province that Henry found so useful, both for what it provided and what it averted, held few attractions for Alice. It bored her, made her restless"—and, in addition, it became the source of the real and imagined illnesses that rapidly turned her into the near-invalid any woman approved of as representative of true virtue during the Gilded Age was expected to become.

On December 11, 1889, Alice could stay silent no longer about all this, confiding, in a burst of candor to her diary: "How sick one gets of being 'good,' how much I should respect myself if I could burst out and make every one wretched for 24 hours; embody selfishness, as they say.... If it were only voluntary and one made a conscious choice, it might enrich the soul a bit, but when it has become simply automatic thro' a sense of the expedient—of the grotesque futility of the perverse—it's degrading! And then the dolts praise one for being 'amiable!' just as if one didn't avoid ruffling one's feathers as one avoids plum-pudding or any other indigestible compound!" But even so the customs of her male-dominated environment forced her to remain silent and act the willing, helpless invalid: On August 18, 1890, she was ready to give in: "Altho' intellectually non-existence is more ungraspable and inconceivable than ever, all longing for fulfillment, all passion to achieve has died down within me. . . . It is that the long ceaseless strain and tension have worn out all aspiration save the one for Rest!" On March 7, 1892, she died, destroyed by the frustrations of having to remain an upper-middle-class woman in dutiful pursuit of the cult of invalidism imposed on the "good" women of the Gilded Age.

The existential dilemma faced by women such as Alice James, to be accepted as "properly acculturated" by yielding to the life of endless inanity required to be "good," or be accused of being a man-destroying vampire eager to undermine humanity's quest for ever-greater evolutionary achievements by trying to "womanize" the age, was, ironically, identified quite effectively by Henry James in *The Bostonians* (1886). Basil Ransom, a Southerner who is the image of a "man's man," and, to be sure, by no means the hero of this novel, sounds quite as benighted as any of the leading male intellectuals of his time, when he rants that "the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a

nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age . . . which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been.”(343) Forty years later Adolf Hitler would use virtually the same language to demonize the “destructive, feminizing” influence of the Jews on Aryan culture. In the lead-up time to the horrors of Nazism, it is clear, Maximilien Colin/Cohen already knew exactly what the long-term effects might be of the social ills he was quite consciously delineating in his painting.

The period's fear of the dangers of “feminization,” fortunately, did not extend to the women of the working classes, who lived in a social environment that could not afford to contemplate championing the presumably “higher” standards of “intellectual” males looking for evolutionary transcendence. No doubt, the real world of working women was in some ways as starkly constricted as that of their wealthy sisters, but at least work, harsh as it might be, allowed them to move out into the simple beauties of the everyday world, as the Scottish painter Robert McGregor(1847—1922) was able to show in *Till Eve Again Recalls Them Loaded Home*, his delightful take on the role of women in the everyday management of life on rural farms, painted just around the same time as Colin's *Souvenirs*.



Robert McGregor
(Scottish, 1847–1922)
*Till Eve Again Recalls them
Loaded Home*, circa 1891
Oil on canvas
24 x 36 inches
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

McGregor, who specialized in depicting episodes from the lives of ordinary working people with titles such as *Coming from the Fields*, *Gathering Potatoes*, and *Going to Market*, had been heavily influenced by the work of Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848—1884), and by the same Hague School artists who had also influenced van Gogh's earliest paintings. Like Adrien Marie, he was among the relatively few painters of the later nineteenth century who were seriously committed to the representation of working people instead of using them to create picturesque, anecdotal—and far too “adorable”—beggar

boys and “pretty” shepherd girls. *Till Eve Again Recalls Them Loaded Home* is based on a line from *The Farmer’s Boy: A Rural Poem*, which was an extended hymn to dairy farming by the English shoemaker and, in his spare time, working-class poet, Robert Bloomfield (1766—1823). It refers to the time near sundown when the cows had to be herded back to their stalls to be milked—not a subject that had been much sought after by artists until painters of the Hague School had begun to document the actual conditions of such work.

What is particularly striking about McGregor’s rendering of the figures in this painting is, indeed, the straightforward, yet affectionate, realism of their presentation. On encountering them we instantly warm to the simple humanity of this young mother and her barely-out-of-swaddling baby, as well as her tomboyish older daughter, who is determined to keep her clod-throwing stick at the ready in case the cow they are guarding on her path back to the barn might be tempted to stray. As they tramp through the mud, we, as viewers, are certainly expected to recognize that their life is hard, but McGregor also wants us to be aware, by surrounding them with the soft, impressionist textures of the beginnings of an evening glow, that, even if it is rough, this little group’s being is clearly essential, not marginal, and that their work is both real and, in essence, beautiful.

Though painted at virtually the same time, the conceptual distance between McGregor’s *Eve* and Wilhelm Vita’s *Scheherazade* (ca. 1891), could not be greater. McGregor’s woman-farmer is probably as “normal” and as far removed from the role of Eve as “temptress” as it was possible to imagine her to be at the time, while Vita’s Eve would, at least at first, seem to be as blatantly sexual as women were suspected of being (or, at least, of wanting to be) by the men of the turn of the century. But, in fact Vita (1846—1919) was here dealing with the story of what many regard as the first true feminist. This is so, even though the introductory tale of the ancient Arabian *Thousand and One Night* collection of narratives featuring Scheherazade reads as if it could have been written by a Middle-Eastern half-brother of August Strindberg: “Trust not at all in women,” a “desirable young girl” warns King Shahryar, who has just discovered that his wife has been consorting with what the 1972 American publication of the English translation of the 1899 French version of the Arabic text (!) identified as “a gigantic negro”: “Filled to the mouth with deceit, they lavish a lying love [on unsuspecting males] Only a miracle brings a man safe from among them.” Heeding this warning, the King has his wife’s head chopped off, and to make certain he is not to be cuckolded again, the tale records, “he ordered his wazir to bring him every night a young and virgin girl, whom he ravished and, when the night had passed, caused to be slain. This he did for three long years; so that the people were all one cry of grief, one tumult of horror.”



Wilhelm Vita
(Austrian, 1846–1919)
Scheherazade, circa 1891
Oil on canvas
74 x 114 inches
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Unable to find any more virgins in the region, the King's wazir is beside himself with worry, not least of all because he is himself the father of "two daughters who in the matters of beauty, charm, brilliance, perfection, and delicate taste were each unrivaled save by the other. The name of the elder was Scheherazade and that of the younger Dunyazade." Scheherazade, in particular, has a brilliant mind, having collected and read "a thousand books of stories telling of the peoples, the kings, and the poets of bygone ages," whereas Dunyazade is a master musician, able to soothe men's souls by weaving heavenly tunes on her flute. We learn that when their father tells them about his dilemma, "Scheherazade said: 'By Allah, father, you must marry me to this king; for either I shall live or, dying, I shall be ransom for the daughters of the Mussulmans and the cause of their deliverance out of the hands of the King.'" Her father is horrified, but Scheherazade prevails, telling her younger sister: "When I am with the King I will send to fetch you; then when you have come and when you see the King finish his act with me, you must say: 'Tell me, my sister, some of your stories of marvel that the night may pass pleasantly.' Then I will tell you tales which, if Allah wills, shall be the deliverance of the daughters of the Mussulmans."

Everything works out as Scheherazade has planned. Dunyazade plays her flute and asks her sister to tell them stories. The King is fascinated by the tales she tells him after each of their episodes of dalliance, and Scheherazade, in her brilliance, knows just where to break off every story just before morning, causing the King, eager to hear the rest, to exclaim over and over again: "By Allah, I will not kill her until I have heard the rest of this truly marvelous tale!" All this, as it turns out, continues for a thousand and one nights, and at that point the King, praising "the wazir's daughter for her eloquence, wisdom, purity, piety, sweetness, honesty and discretion," (as well as for the three sons she has borne him in-between!) vows to marry her rather than chop off her head. Thus

Scheherazade, aside from having been able to save hundreds of virgins from an ignoble death over the years, has also proven to the King that women can be at least as wise and honest and trustworthy as any man.

The Book of the Thousand and One Nights, with its many cautionary tales about governance, had become very popular in Europe during the nineteenth century, but especially so at the height of the Western obsession with Orientalist painting during the 1890s. It is therefore not at all surprising that, by 1891, Wilhelm Vita was reported, as a biographical sketch of his life in a series about *Wiener Ateliers* reported that year, to be at work: “on a large genre painting which intends to bring Scheherazade—the beautiful as well as wise narrator of *The Thousand and One Nights*—before our eyes in all her righteous anger.” Vita, who was known for his work at the court of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had by then already produced a number of portraits of Kaiser Franz-Joseph, crown-prince Rudolf, and numerous other members of the royal family, and he may have, quite appropriately, intended to have his “Scheherazade” be understood as a cautionary parable about the future of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

At this time, after all, Franz-Joseph, who, in reality, looked quite a bit like the King in Vita’s painting, was, as many of his subjects believed, unduly obsessed with the Orient, and especially with the Ottoman Empire, when instead he should have paid much closer attention to Europe and the rise of Germany. In addition he was (just like King Scharyar) in the thrall of a “beautiful and brilliant” woman, in his case an actress known as Frau Schratt, who, for twenty-seven years, on a weekly basis, would tell the reclusive Kaiser stories about the theatre and about what was happening in the outside world. However, whether or not this can be seen as the subtext of Vita’s painting, the work itself is clearly a tribute to the power and intelligence of women at a time when most of the artist’s contemporaries were determined to depict them as perverse and inherently evil, eager to depredate men and waylay them from their quest for evolutionary excellence. It is clear that Vita admired strong women, for at least one of his major earlier works, *The Guardian of the Secret* depicts in quite a positive fashion a formidable, authoritative (and also bare breasted) warrior woman who is ready to fight—and clearly, if necessary, kill—anyone who might try to unveil the secret she is guarding!

It is usually not one of the more difficult things to determine the anti-feminine quotient embedded in the Gilded Age artists’ portrayal of mythological or otherwise socially threatening “fantasy” women. Typically, they would portray them as febrile, wide-eyed, slightly mad, and, especially toward the turn of the century, as scrawny, hungry-looking spermatophages, ready to depredate the males around them. What is therefore particularly interesting about Vita’s Scheherazade, is that he represents her in a solidly realistic fashion: she is clearly not “angry” as Vita’s biographer maintained rather tendentiously, but instead, even in her nakedness, comfortably self-possessed and certainly well-fed. This is not at all a threatening female, and it would not be difficult to credit her with the

kind of laconic, down-to-earth practicality the period's artists were rarely willing to credit women with in their fantasy images.

Much the same could be said about the starkly direct and realistic nude the American painter Frank Duveneck (1848—1919) painted in 1892, probably while in Paris. Like Vita, Duveneck, who had initially trained in Germany at the Munich Academy, along with Shirlaw and William Merritt Chase (1849—1916), was at first primarily known for his portraits and genre paintings. However, he began to spend a good deal of time in France and Italy as a member of the expatriate circle around Henry James (who regarded him as a rather boorish Midwesterner), because he had fallen in love with Elizabeth (Lizzie) Boott, the incipient artist daughter of one of James' Boston Brahmin friends. Lizzie had become a student of Duveneck's in 1879, at a school he had started in Munich, but, unfortunately, her snobbish father did not permit them to marry until 1886. Over the next few years the two of them spent a good deal of time in Paris, where they were married. Both, in fact, had work accepted for the Salon of 1888. Duveneck's entry was a striking, life-sized portrait of his wife, but sadly, Lizzie died quite suddenly of pneumonia that year.



Frank Duveneck
(1848-1919)
Reclining Nude on a Riverbank,
1892
Oil on canvas
32 ¼ x 46 ¾ inches
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

It is clear that Duveneck had become heavily influenced by French art during these years. His brownish “German palette” took on a far lighter tone, and much of his later work was to mix a very American focus on realism with bright impressionist color. He was devastated by his wife's death, and tried to capture her memory in several major works. However, when, in 1892, he revisited Paris, he spent a good deal of time painting nudes, perhaps in an attempt to rebound from the tragedy of his wife's death. The yearly Paris Salon exhibitions were notorious for their liberal attitude toward paintings of starkly direct, and truly naked, female nudes—though these were often made to seem more

“appropriate” by being thinly disguised as mermaids or wood nymphs, and thereby given at least some of the trappings of myth.

Most of these nudes were painted according to a highly predictable formula. Typically they would show the putative nymph lying on her back, which they often gave a concave curve, as if she were in the throes of ecstasy. She might be posed among the fallen leaves of a wooded glade, or being lifted on the crest of a wave, again, on her back, and with an even more precariously curved spine. It is clear that these works were directed to the same audience that would, half a century later, eagerly peruse the centerfolds of such men’s magazines as *Playboy*, and, unsurprisingly, many of these works would ultimately end up over the bars of some of the more stylish saloons of the period. They were mostly formulaic, painted according to the rather mechanical rules of ideal physical proportions the artists who painted them were made to follow during their art school education.

It is possible that Duveneck had such paintings in mind when he painted his own “reclining nude,” and he may even have thought of it as a possible entry for the Salon, but what is, in fact, most striking about this work is how different it is from the typical Salon nude. Of course, the trappings are there: In the background we see an effectively suggestive “entry to the grotto of feminine sexual being,” in the foreground the “elusive element of feminine identity” (i.e. water), and we see the woman placed close to the trees (which were widely known to represent male potency: indeed, Salon nymphs were quite often caught hugging such trees). But, what is most striking about Duveneck’s painting is that the woman he painted is so real—not a barely disguised erotic fantasy, but a real woman, with an individualized face, and a body that by no means measured up to the ideal proportions of the art schools’ classic plaster models.

Also notable is that though this woman may be lying in the grass, she is alert, not “ecstatic.” She is actively looking at something—which was almost unheard of among the standard Salon “nymphs.” She, moreover, has that somewhat peculiar, and yet quite realistic, fold of loose flesh along her lower belly we also encounter in several other Duveneck nudes. In addition, we see her palpably real breast hanging loosely under her arm, instead of the standard firm, perky bosom of the typical Salon nude. This, in other words, is a real woman with an undeniably *personal* identity. We might even recognize her if we were to encounter her, all dressed and stylish, in an elegant ballroom of the period. Her face is not unlike that of Lizzie we see in the portraits of his wife Duveneck painted, only this face is more freely expressive; it is casual, not formal. This woman also wears her hair in a manner quite similar to the way Lizzie wore hers. Could this be a posthumous tribute? We shall never know, but the stark realism of this work makes the question intriguing!

There may not be much of the warrior in *The Angel of the Book of Life*, also known as *The Recording Angel* (1896/7) by Eric Pape (1870—1938), but there is certainly quite a bit of the temptress in her. One would assume that it might have been this angel's primary task to record the deeds—both good and bad—of the mortals on the earth below in the shadowy, open, oversized book of life against which she leans, but, frankly, notwithstanding her golden wings and elegant little halo, this angel seems not at all averse from testing the virtuous resolve of her subjects to the limit. Pape has painted her not only as a slender, almost undulant, and very elegant sylph, but he has also gifted her with long, reddish-golden tresses. The artists of the turn of the century liked to bestow red hair on their most “worldly” women, since, at the time, such red hair was generally seen as a way to identify women with extensive sexual experience. In addition, this angel looks toward us with what can only be termed a pronounced “come-hither” look. It would therefore seem that this presumably ideal angel was nonetheless remarkably materialistic in her motivation. In other words, Pape was here in the process of turning an “angel” into a rather knowledgeable, “earthly” woman.



Eric Pape (1870–1938)
The Angel of the Book of Life, 1897
Oil on canvas
76 x 41 inches
Collection of Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Frederic Louis Moritz (Eric) Pape was born in San Francisco, but painted this opus while studying in Paris—which was still, and would continue to be for several more decades, the hotbed of thinly veiled eroticism in art, preferably disguised as symbolic wisdom. Developing an interest in Orientalism, Pape traveled to Egypt, and, on his return to the United States, he also became a prolific illustrator, even opening an art school in Boston where the popular narrative painter and illustrator N. C. Wyeth was to find an auspicious start to his career.

If there was still a measure of subtlety in Pape’s treatment of what by this time had become a commonplace cultural assumption, widely disseminated by the period’s biologists, physicians, and psychoanalysts, as well as by its artists, that the “reproductive imperative” had imbedded a presumably irreversible predatory sexual impulse in woman (one that could only be held under control by essentially burying her in domesticity), there is virtually no evidence of such reticence in the Austrian painter Andreas Groll’s painting *Pan and the Dryads* of 1898. The classically trained Groll (1850—1907) had, by the time he painted this work, developed a major reputation for his large-scale murals and altarpieces, primarily in churches throughout Austria. Known as a man of great learning, the strain of developing large religious murals in a very elaborate, baroque-styled manner no doubt took its toll, for he was also known to divert himself by painting mythological fantasies such as *Pan and the Dryads* as well, one assumes to relieve himself of the burden imposed on him by the gravity of so much religious responsibility. Here, for instance, he explores the fascination exerted on a bevy of truly primitive, love-besotted ladies (or rather “dryads” as the nymphs of the woods were called) by the goat-footed, horned god Pan, who, by playing his syrinx, or panpipe, habitually drove young women into such ecstasy that they would engage in frantic circle dances.



Andreas Groll
(Austrian, 1850-1907)
Pan and the Dryads, 1898
Oil on canvas
30 x 42 inches
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Indeed, the group of dryads Pan is here seen entertaining with his magic flute would seem to have already exhausted themselves, probably in exactly such a session of orgiastic dancing, the way these nymphs of the woods were captured in numerous paintings of this period. Usually they were shown accompanying themselves with tambourines like the one on which the young lady in the middle of Groll's painting is pictured leaning. Still, even though the word "panic" derives from the way Pan's actions could feed such unreasoning impulses, the nymphs in Groll's painting are clearly more amused than "panicked." This painting, in other words, visualizes a number of the most prominent Gilded Age male fantasies about what women were supposed to want, fantasies that were broadly peddled as being accurate representations of the inner workings of female desire by the vast majority of the period's intellectuals.

Much of this also applies to another work painted in 1898, this one titled *A Sail!* by the English painter John William Whiteley (active 1882–1916). But where Groll had still made at least a perfunctory effort to disguise the contemporary implications of his nymphs' primitive urges by clothing them in what could be interpreted as vaguely ancient-looking tunics, Whiteley saw no need to give his sirens anything at all to wear. In fact, even though we are to understand that these young ladies are true sirens—ancient Homeric temptresses, excited by the imminent approach of Ulysses' trireme (which the artist painted unobtrusively into the upper left corner of his canvas)—it is difficult to avoid the impression that this is actually a group of very modern shopgirls from London's West End caught in the midst of a rather daring summer outing on a phallic-looking rock, somewhere along the White Cliffs of Dover. The panicky agitation of these very modern sirens as Ulysses approaches is, therefore, clearly indicative of what the scientists of the period insisted was the unalterable impulse toward evolutionary stasis central to the reproductive imperative dominating "the eternal feminine."



John William Whiteley
(British, active 1882–1916)
A Sail!, 1898
Oil on canvas
46 x 69 1/2 inches
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Ulysses' encounter with the sirens had become a favorite subject for paintings during the Gilded Age, since these temptresses could be blamed for driving men into self-destructive, and indeed “devolutionary” behavior. But even so, Whiteley's dramatic exploration of this theme can be seen as very much part of the ideological vanguard of its time, not only in terms of its unabashedly contemporary treatment, but also in terms of its style. The work's broad, flamboyant brushwork is remarkably daring for a painting that was exhibited at the otherwise rather staid British Royal Academy in 1898, an institution usually characterized by a preponderance of hyper-realistic or pre-Raphaelite-styled work. The colors of Whiteley's painting and its wide brush strokes are, in fact, closer to what we might associate with the innovative styling of an Edvard Munch (1863—1944), than with the typical Royal Academy product. Thus, it can be argued that *A Sail!* is a painting—like those of Munch's—in which elements of stylistic modernism are blended with an equally “modern” representation of the period's males' sexual fantasies regarding women.

Otto Weininger (1880—1902), one of Sigmund Freud's star students, was to spell out these fantasies (though peddled as truths) in his posthumous opus *Sex and Character* (1903), which, not surprisingly, became a huge international best seller. Weininger was a young man faithfully echoing what he had learned from his elders: “Woman,” he confidently declared, “is not a monad, and has no sense of individuality.” Apparently this had never been made clear to the very real—and very startled—woman in the American artist Arthur Burdett Frost's marvelous painting about a *Ladies Open-Air Painting Class* (ca. 1905). An artist, about to set up her easel in a field near Giverny, suddenly discovers an entire group of would-be artists occupying a field she had clearly already staked out as her own. It is obvious that neither she, nor any of those others working in this field dotted with Monet-styled haystacks, are driven by any primitive urge to depredate males. All this ambitious woman artist wants to do is find a quiet place where she can work to express her individuality in her art, the last thing she wants to see is an overcrowded field of competitors.

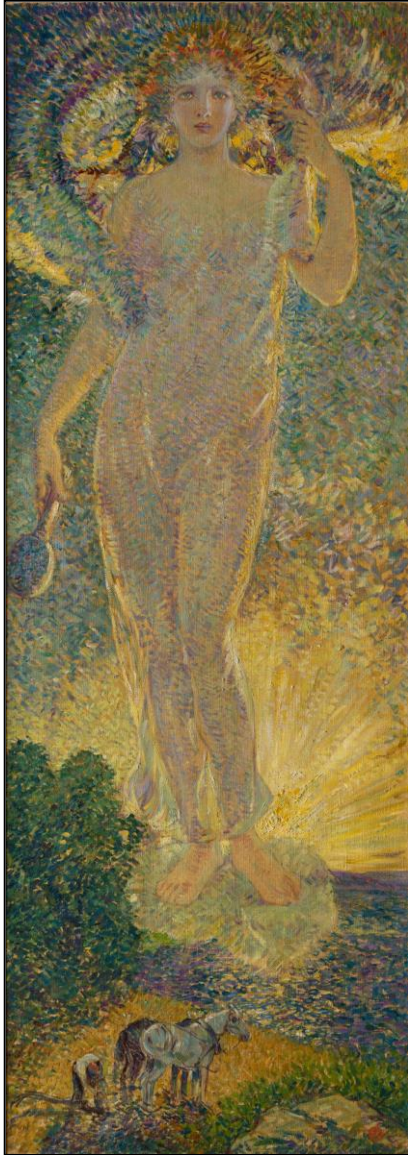


Arthur Burdett Frost
(1851–1928)
Ladies' Open-air Painting Class,
circa 1905
Oil on canvas, en grisaille
15 1/4 x 23 1/2 inches
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Frost (1851—1928) had an ability to evoke nature in rapid-fire brush strokes not unlike those of John Singer Sargent (1856—1925), but he was color blind, and when he was required to do work in color, his wife (whom he may well have portrayed in this painting) would have to lay out the various colors for him. When working for himself he preferred to work—as here—in grisaille. He also spent a good part of his time working on (primarily humorous) black-and-white illustrations for books and magazines. He is often credited with having created some of the first sequential series of narrative drawings that would ultimately develop into the modern comic strip.

Still, notwithstanding the efforts of laconic observers such as Frost, who were able to recognize the simple, everyday humanity of women, the first two decades of the twentieth century continued to see numerous “symbolic” representations of woman as either a goddess or a creature straight out of mythology. But what is striking is that the American artists working during this period continued to focus, like Frank Duveneck, primarily on the personal identity of the women they painted—something the prominent turn-of-the-century critic Charles Caffin emphasized in his book *The Story of American Painting* (1907) as differentiating the Americans from the Europeans. The latter, he pointed out, tended to strip even actual portraits of women of their individuality: “Frequently the subject, for all her finery, or possibly because so much stress has been put upon it, does not even look like a lady. She has been made to flaunt her person and costume upon one’s notice after the fashion of those who go to market with their personal wares. This blatant form of vulgarity, not uncommon in the portraits by foreigners, is, it must be acknowledged, rarely seen in those by Americans.”

Among the illustrations in his book Caffin included a *European Sybil* by the already prominent American painter (as well as, later, novelist, movie director and script writer) Hugo Ballin (1879—1956), pointing out that this American tendency toward a focus on a much less “vulgar” form of realism was even noticeable in Ballin’s presentation of this allegorical subject, for “idealism scarcely pervades the feeling of the picture.” Ballin, indeed, though he had painted this “ideal” image in a “classical” style, probably directly influenced by Bouguereau, had, in fact, painted a group of very real figures. Ballin’s work was to undergo a remarkable stylistic transformation between 1906, when he painted his “European Sybil,” and 1912, when he painted his, in its subject matter otherwise equally allegorical, *Ceres, Goddess of Harvest*. But even so, the figure of Ceres, again, had the more individualized features of a real woman. Indeed when he painted another version of this painting, which was installed in the State Capitol Building in Madison, Wisconsin, he presented it as an allegory of *Lake Monona*—indicative of the extremely flexible, and not particularly “classically justified” titles the artist tended to attach to his otherwise nominally mythological representations!



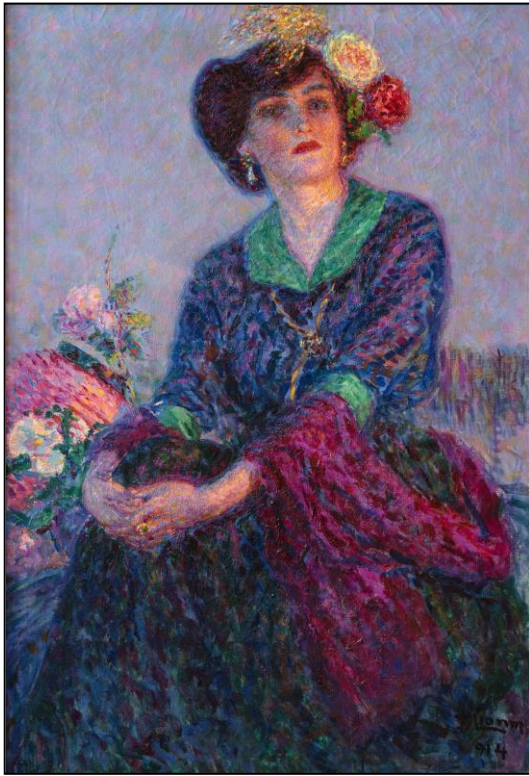
Hugo Ballin (1879–1956)
Goddess of Harvest or Ceres aka Lake Monona, 1913
Oil on canvas
77 x 28 inches
Collection of Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

After studying at the Art Students League, and subsequently winning two of the principal awards of the National Academy of Design, the Thomas B. Clark prize in 1906, and the Second Hallgarten Prize in 1907, the artist decided to travel to Europe, where he was to stay for three years, most likely between 1908 and 1911, working primarily in Florence and Rome. During this time he clearly became heavily influenced by the rebellious modernist focus of the Italian “Divisionist” painters, led by Giovanni Segantini (1858-1899). The Divisionists had developed a form of post-impressionism that focused on the tight juxtaposition of short strokes of overlapping primary colors in the construction of their imagery, instead of the stiff, more mechanical-seeming distribution of small dots characteristic of the pointillism developed by Georges Seurat (1859-1891). Divisionism became a strong influence on late nineteenth and early twentieth century Italian painters, including such soon-to-become Futurists as Gino Severini (1883—1966), Umberto

Boccioni (1882—1916) and Carlo Carrà (1881—1966). Hugo Ballin, who was only a few years older than these artists, clearly also caught the Divisionist bug during his sojourn in Italy.

What is particularly interesting about Ballin's Divisionist *Ceres* (or *Demeter*), the ancient goddess of the corn harvest (who also had the task, as Robert Graves pointed out in his perusal of *The Greek Myths*, of initiating “brides and bridegrooms into the secrets of the couch”), is that although the artist endows her with all the super-“idealized” mock-realism of Bougereau-styled mythological painting, he shows *Ceres* as emanating a bright, indeed quasi-mystical, light—a feature eminently suitable to a Divisionist approach. And even though he surrounds her with all the traditional trappings of classical mythology—from the farmer with his plow and horses, and the seed shaker she carries in her right hand, and a barely recognizable symbolic phallic snake representing fertility winding itself around her head and shoulders—his *Ceres* appears to us ultimately not so much as a goddess, but as the undisguised portrait of a real woman. As such it may well be, quite appropriately, a glowing impression of Mabel, his own wife, whom he had married just a few months before painting this clearly lovingly executed, luminescent, celebratory work.

The Italian painter Enrico Lionne (Enrico Della Leonessa; 1865—1921), was an early convert to the Divisionist style. Like other Divisionists, he was a staunch supporter of progressive politics and social reform. His best-known work, *Grassi e Magri—The Fat and the Lean*, (1899) shows a group of grossly overweight rich people being serenaded at an outdoor restaurant by two super-skinny, hungry-looking musicians. The message of his painting *La Trasteverina—or, Return from the Feast of Divine Love* is less blunt, but otherwise no less politically charged. This lovely, colorful portrait of a woman from Trastevere, a working class neighborhood of Rome, was clearly intended to emphasize her beauty and dignity. He portrays her as a figure of truly regal bearing, though she no doubt came from a hardscrabble environment, and was probably wearing borrowed, or otherwise cobbled-together mock-finery, for the “feast of divine love” was a yearly festivity for which the women of Trastevere would dress up in whatever festive clothing they could find. All this would have been amply clear, given the painting's title, to viewers who saw it at the Venice Biennale of 1914. Lionne subsequently also chose to include this festive portrait among his contributions to the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, but at that point he chose to drop the political reference imbedded in the “Trasteverina” title, which would have been lost on an American audience anyway, changing it instead to the more neutrally descriptive *Return from the Feast of Divine Love*. Yet even this change appears not to have made the painting more palatable to the conservative American critical establishment—which complained loudly that, like most of the other Italian Divisionist entries at the exposition, the work was painted with far too many bright—and therefore “vulgar”—colors.



Enrico Lionne (Italian, 1865–1922)
La Trasteverina, or Return From the [Feast of] Divine Love, 1914
Oil on canvas
48 x 32 inches
Collection of Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Thus we see two interesting, yet quite opposite intentions operating in these virtually contemporaneous works, by the American Ballin and the Italian Lionne. Where Lionne was determined to turn his very real working-class woman into a virtual goddess representing “divine love,” Ballin, in capturing the goddess Ceres—surrounded by all the accoutrements of her divinity—ultimately ended up with the luminous image of a real woman. Both artists used what was a very radical, “modernist” style for the period, and both subverted the “idealizing” artistic conventions still in place at the time to present the viewer with strongly individualized portraits of real women whom they clearly admired. Thus both painters can also be said to have subverted the dominant ideology of a period in which women were still habitually denigrated as *unindividualized*—and often actively regressive—beings.

Their direct contemporary, the American painter Louis Frederick Berneker (1872—1937), painted his *Proserpine* (1914) at just about the same time, but did so in a far more traditional style. Berneker was clearly determined to hold fast to all the “idealizing” characteristics of that style, as well as to the conventional mythological narrative: Proserpine (also known as Persephone or Core) was, in fact, the daughter of Ceres. Having been abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld, she became queen of his domain of the dead. Ceres, who searched for her far and wide after her abduction, was finally able to arrange with Hades that she need only stay with him three months a year. On returning to the upper world she was able to help Ceres sow the seeds for each year’s

harvest, but at the same time her yearly returns to the underworld created on earth the atmospheric conditions known as “the dead of winter.” Thus Persephone also came to be known as “she who brings destruction,” both the source of the renewal of the earth’s fertility and of death—the perfect source for what the misogynists of the Gilded Age could identify as the deadly power of the sexual woman, the evil temptress whose depredations were designed to destroy the males she tempted.



Louis Frederick Berneker
(1872–1937)
Proserpine, circa 1914
Oil on canvas
27 x 22 1/4 inches
Collection of
Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Berneker’s painting shows Persephone in a grotto-like underworld, though we see her close to a cleft that opens to the upper earth. The grotto-like setting is, in narrative terms, similar to that inhabited by Groll’s nymphs, and it also represent the kind of opening into the earth Duveneck located behind his nude figure. As a figure representing fertility Berneker’s Persephone, of course, has the brilliant orange-red hair of the sexually experienced woman, but, interestingly, she is far more individualized, far more a real person, than the women who are her attendants. Thus Berneker is here able to develop a scene that, while exploiting several, quite negative sexual themes imbedded in the tradition of the classical “ideal,” succeeds in painting a (semi-nude) portrait of a “real” woman, thereby at least partially undercutting that facile nineteenth century appropriation of old psycho-social ideas about gender that would continue to fester throughout the twentieth century by being translated into innumerable anti-feminine narrative assumptions which, in turn, would continue to rule Western “high” culture, and

ultimately, even come to rule the gender conventions of American comic books well into the twenty-first century.

But a counter-cultural movement to this “idealization” of anti-feminine attitudes also began to develop at this time. The “individualizing” quality that had begun to creep into the “idealized” portraits of women in the work of painters such as Ballin, Lionne, and even Berneker, came to be incorporated more and more frequently into the actual portraits of women painted during the mid-1910s by otherwise still quite traditional artists. The American painter Maurice Molarsky (1885—1950), an immigrant from Russia, was among those who were able to “shake themselves free of the fetters of prettiness and sentimentality” Charles Caffin had seen as dominating too much of early twentieth-century American art. Clearly Molarsky did not participate in the movement away from “character,” that “functional degradation” of their female subjects which Caffin abhorred in the work of the Gilded-Age Europeans.



Maurice Molarsky (1885–1950)
Portrait of a Young Woman Holding a Red Book,
circa 1915
Oil on canvas
50 1/2 x 35 inches
Collection of Sandra & Bram Dijkstra

Although we no longer know the name of the young woman holding her red book in Molarsky’s portrait, we recognize her as an individualized, intelligent, thinking human being—far more so, indeed, than the women we encounter among the often very generalized portraits by fashionable painters such as Sargent. This, very contrarian, dogged emphasis on the real by many early twentieth-century American artists may have contributed to their being pushed into obscurity by the advocates of twentieth-century modernism and abstraction, who were ultimately as eager to dismiss “reality” in favor of

idealized form as the academic artists of the nineteenth century, who, in a tendentious attempt to redefine “ideal” womanhood, had ended up denigrating the real women of their age.