The role of the Parisian café in the emergence of modern art: an analysis of the nineteenth century café as social institution and symbol of modern art

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THE ROLE OF THE PARISIAN CAFÉ IN THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN ART: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CAFÉ AS SOCIAL INSTITUTION AND SYMBOL OF MODERN LIFE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in The School of Art

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the significance of the Paris café in Modern Art. In discussing the social and historical events of mid to late nineteenth century Paris, it establishes the atmosphere in which the first modern artists broke from the formal academy system. The primary focus is two-fold. First, how the café was established in Parisian culture as a social institution and the role this played as a replacement for the Ecole des Beaux Arts and in the formation of a new art movement. Second, how the new artists incorporated the café culture into their art as a representation of modern life. In discussing the café culture of the late-nineteenth century, it goes on to examine the role of the drink absinthe as a symbol of café life. The works of Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Jean-Francois Raffaelli and Vincent Van Gogh are analyzed and compared in order to establish the symbolism of the café. Primary and Secondary resources were used, including original illustrations and quotes by the café patrons, artists and writers, to establish physical descriptions of the café interiors. This study shows that the café culture in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century was an influential factor in the birth of modern art. For the new
artists who portrayed the café in their works, it was a symbol of modern life.
Introduction

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the École des Beaux Arts controlled all aspects of the art world, centered in Paris at the time. As the only accepted art academy and the only means of public exhibition, the Academy was a stifling presence. It was not until the mid nineteenth century that this art institution came under attack. Movements such as Romanticism and later, Realism, challenged the strict stylistic standards of the Academy.

This break from the formal Academy coincided with other social and historical events in Paris. It was at this time that the Haussmann project was changing the face of Paris. The effects of the reconstruction plan went far beyond the physical appearance of the Parisian streets. There were also major changes in the lifestyles of the Parisian working class. These events culminated in the awakening of a new modern consciousness. This new feeling of modernity did not go unnoticed by Parisian intellectuals. In literature as well as art there was an overwhelming drive to embrace this new modern consciousness. For the art world it meant the emergence of a new group of artists who followed the lead of the Realists before them. This group of artists came to be
known as the Impressionists. Their decision to turn away from the Academy made public acceptance of their art a huge challenge. Despite its growing unpopularity, the Salon still controlled the art market. For the fledgling Impressionists it was an ever-present obstacle to their success. They needed an alternate support system, something to replace the Academy studios as a means for artistic instruction and discussion. They found this at the café.

The main purpose of this thesis is to examine the role of the Parisian café in the Impressionist’s break from the Academy and their pursuit of a new modern style. It will examine the café’s development as a haven for those artists committed to rejecting the established art institutions. In examining the history of the café in Paris, as well as providing detailed descriptions of the major cafes of the period, it will establish how the café became a social institution and a symbol of modern life in Paris.

While examining the social and historical significance of the café, the focus is on two aspects of its influence. First, a historical discussion of the Impressionist group in Montmartre and the role two cafes: Café Guerbois and La Nouvelle Athènes played in the birth of Impressionism. Second, a study of paintings from this period reveals how
the café became a symbol of the everyday life artists were striving to express. Furthermore how absinthe, one of the most heated social issues of the time and directly tied to the café atmosphere, became an important part of this expression of modern life. The café would serve these artists on many different levels and have a lasting impact on the emergence of modern art.
Chapter I The Café Emerges as an Artist “Studio”: 1750-1860

Throughout the nineteenth century, there were a succession of cafés patronized by the intellectual class. With the new modern feeling of Paris, the café would take its place as a haven for artistic and literary discussion and debate. Many of the artistic movements that paved the way to a more modern style had beginnings amongst the scattered tables and chairs of the café interior. Fresh ideas were born in the café, nourished in an atmosphere of young passionate writers and artists whose disillusionment with the tired, reactionary ways of the establishment pushed them in a new direction. The rebuilding of Paris, the diminishing power of the academy and the emergence of the café as a social institution converged in the mid nineteenth century, creating momentum toward a sense of progress and modernity. Cafés such as Le Divan Lepelltier, Le Brasserie Andler, Les Brasserie des Martyrs, the Café Tortoni, and later, the Café Guerbois and La Nouvelle Athènes replaced the Academy studio as meeting places for artists and their ideas. There was a general feeling of excitement that intoxicated more forward thinking minds.
The Parisian café as a place for intellectual discussion and debate was by no means a late nineteenth century invention. Parisian intellects were gathering together in public establishments as early as the 1680’s. The first coffeehouses attracted a more elite crowd whose political discussions caused a great deal of anxiety for King Louis XIV. This atmosphere of intellectual discussion continued in the first Parisian cafés. King Louis XIV was so anxious about the political discussions that he ordered them monitored by his police prefect.¹

In the early nineteenth century, The Latin Quarter was the home of the bohemian crowd. These were the starving artists and writers made famous by Henri Mürger. There was a particularly strong literary movement in the Latin Quarter. Changes in Paris toward the middle of the nineteenth century brought the café to another level.

One of the events that contributed to the changing atmosphere of Paris was Baron Haussmann’s city-plan for modern Paris. This reconstruction project was commissioned by Emperor Louis Napoleon, the leader of the Second Empire. It was a massive undertaking, beginning in 1848 and continuing into the 1870’s.² The town planner Baron Georges Eugene Haussmann led the project. It can be considered one of the crowning achievements of
the Second Empire, and the changes Haussmann made to the city are still a major part of contemporary Paris. The project, which went on over two decades, was responsible for widening many of the narrow, winding streets of the old city as well as creating new boulevards. The Rue di Rivoli was the first of its kind to run straight through the city.\(^3\) The effects of Haussmann’s project went beyond the physical appearance of the new city. The impact could be felt in every area of Parisian society.

For the citizens of Paris at the time, the Haussmann project created an atmosphere of light and space in the city.\(^4\) The ladies and gentlemen of the bourgeoisie could be seen strolling along the spacious boulevards. For patrons of the Parisian café, the widened boulevards and sidewalks were more accommodating to the tables and chairs that could be placed outside the establishment. Accompanying this was an ever-increasing amount of leisure time - more of an opportunity to enjoy a few hours to socialize at a café. It was a time when modern fashion and leisure rivaled politics in conversation. For these new fashionable crowds, there was no better place to see and be seen than the café. Edward King articulated the Parisian relationship with the café when he wrote in 1867:
“The huge Paris world centers twice, thrice daily; it is at the café; it gossips at the café, it intrigues and the café; it plots, it dreams, it suffers, it hopes, at the café.”

The café was becoming the stage for modern Paris. The café atmosphere was conducive to free thinking, which in turn made it a prime arena for intellectual discussion and debate. Both artists and writers took advantage this. A passage from a booklet published in 1860, *Les Dames*, gives another account of the emergence of the café as an intellectual headquarters:

“In the beginning the café was a place where young people could meet, mix freely, speak openly of politics and literature. Often the proprietor of the establishment participated in these informal meetings, sometimes even presiding, not particularly concerned about making money. He was happy to provide his small clientele with an ordinary room and good drinks at a low price. These were the good old days of Bohemia and the Bohemian life described by Mürger. These social gatherings brought together future men of letters, painters,
sculptors and students, a scene which brings to mind the café Momus.”

Alfred Delvau, an author who wrote of Parisian society, said of this relationship:

“The street, the cabaret, the café, the restaurant, in order to show ourselves in good moments or bad, to chat to be happy or unhappy, to satisfy all the needs of our vanity or our intellect, to laugh or to cry.”

An archetypal character emerged in this mid-nineteenth century society - the flâneur. He was a gentleman intellectual and a consummate observer who took in the new society around him with a keen eye and a sharp wit. Walter Benjamin describes:

“The street became a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls... The walls are the desks against which he presses his note-books; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done.”

The café was perhaps the best arena for the flâneur. It was the center of the latest gossip, news and
intellectual debate. In the café, the flâneur kept the company of other artists, writers and the fashionable bourgeoisie. He would seat himself at a table, listen to their conversation and scrutinize their behavior, all under the guise of quietly reading a newspaper. This was the forte of the flâneur; for while he was mentally documenting all these things, he remained removed from the action. This detached observation of modern life would influence the subject and style of artists like Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas.

Members of fashionable Paris society were not the only ones who would indulge in the new café life. The art world in Paris was rapidly changing in the mid-nineteenth century. Institutions that shaped the art world for centuries were beginning to weaken. For the artists who would break away in this changing time, the café would serve as a haven for those whose modern ideas were not welcome in the formal, established art community.

Throughout the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts dominated art instruction and taste. The Academy preached the value of drawing over color. It had a strict definition of what could be accepted as “fine art”. Paintings that came out
of the Academy had fine drawing and smooth surfaces devoid of any indication of the artist’s hand. Compositions reflected the value the Academy placed on classical ideals of order and symmetry in art. As the Ecole des Beaux-Arts controlled artistic styles, so the annual juried Salons controlled the exhibition of the artist’s work. For artists, the only real public venue for their works was the annual public exhibition held by the Salon. In keeping with the teachings of the Academy, the jurors’ artistic taste favored what the instructors considered to be “high art.” This definition included grandiose, historical and mythological subjects. Academy teaching emphasized drawing over color. These two old giants— the Academy and the juried Salon— occupied an unassailable place in the art world. Under this system, there was little to no room for artistic discussion or experimentation. Painting became increasingly restrictive. An artist ambitious for a successful career had no choice but to digest the teachings of the Academy and hope his paintings would be deemed worthy by the Salon jury. Even Ingres, the great defender of the teachings of the Academy, showed disdain for the system it created:
“The Salon stifles and corrupts the feeling for the great, the beautiful; artists are driven to exhibit there by the attractions of profit, the desire to get themselves noticed at any price, by the supposed good fortune of an eccentric subject that is capable of producing an effect and leading to an advantageous sale. Thus the salon is literally no more than a picture shop, a bazaar in which the tremendous number of objects is overwhelming and business rules instead of art.”

Many emerging artists shared Ingres’ views about the Academy. However, unlike Ingres, who was already an established member of the Academy, these artists were the ones who felt the brunt of the juries’ narrow-minded decisions. The system had to change, as discontent was growing stronger with each year. Towards the mid part of the nineteenth century, these changes slowly began to occur. A new breed of artist emerged - one that was no longer content to remain complacently within the confines of the Academy system. He would employ a style that challenged all the traditional conventions of the Academy.

As the new artists chipped away at the armor of the Academy, so began the conflict of old versus new,
traditional versus modern. In the early nineteenth century, the most heated debate was between the Neoclassicists, led by Ingres, and the Romanticists, led by Delacroix. This debate, which pitted the value of drawing against color and dramatic action, dominated artistic discussion of the period. Artists often gathered at the studios of their masters or instructors. Teachers at the Academy, such as Thomas Couture, received visitors or students at their studio, which inevitably became a forum for the hot topic of the time. One account tells that Paul de Saint-Victor brought his cousin, John la Farge, to the studio of Théodore Chassériau, where he was immediately confronted with the question regarding his position on the matter of Delacroix and Ingres. \(^1^0\) The argument caused a certain tension between the two sides. John la Farge remarked in regards to Delacroix:

“[He] was known to the younger men at a great distance. His studio was open to anyone who wished to call, if they were students. Notwithstanding, we all felt a veil of something between us and him, and few of us had the courage to do more than occasionally present our respects.” \(^1^1\)
This kind of artistic discussion was a sign of things to come. It was significant that there were alternative styles developing to spark artistic debate. From this point onward, the atmosphere of change would only grow stronger. It was felt in all aspects of Parisian society. Courbet’s realist ideas would lead artists in a new direction, and pave the way for the next generation of artists, the Impressionists. Their changes in lifestyle, theories, and art style would separate them once and for all from the Academy system. They embraced the everyday reality of modern Paris, rather than the lofty Academic subjects. Though not always completely compatible in their beliefs, modern artists were united against the official teachings. As outcasts of the Academy, it was necessary for many of them to find alternate places to discuss their new ideas. At the café, they were free to discuss ideas that were not allowed in the studios of the École des Beaux-Arts. George Bataille wrote:

“It was to the man of culture what the races were to elegant women, who found there an escape from the stuffy and rather inaccessible life of the Salons.”

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One of the first cafés to play host to the intellectual crowd of writers and artists was Le Divan Lepelletier. This café was home to many members of the Romanticist movement. Le Divan Lepelletier opened its doors in 1837 and soon became a popular haunt for writers and artists. An article in an important Paris daily newspaper mentions the café:

“In this little nook, around marble-topped tables, on badly padded benches in spite of their pompous name of divans, to the sound of those innocent games of dominos, the best minds of our age gathered, chatted, prophesied.”

Eugene Delacroix, the accepted leader of the Romanticist movement, only made an occasional appearance. When he did go to the Le Divan Lepelletier, he had the ability to converse for hours on end and enjoyed the company of his fellow intellectuals. The café continued its reputation as a home for intellectual discourse with other groups as well as the Romanticists.

A heated artistic debate is said to have taken place between Thomas Couture, the Academy painter/teacher, and Gustave Courbet, the Realist artist. The two shouted insults about each other’s paintings from their respective tabletops. Couture claimed that Courbet was
“incapable of creating a masterpiece,” while Courbet maintained that Couture’s painting was “trivial in concept and pretty in shape,” something that resembled “an old faded courtesan.” This type of heated exchange energized the café atmosphere and created the ideal arena for artistic discussion. Alas, as popular as it was, Le Divan Lepelletier closed its doors in 1859 under the threat of demolition. By then Courbet’s realist art was well established and he muscled his way into the circle of debate over art styles that included Ingres vs. Delacroix. For the growing number of Realist artists there would be a new café, or rather brasserie, where they could discuss their ideas.

The Parisian brasserie had a decidedly different appearance than the café. One of the main differences, also denoted in the name, was the type of alcohol served. The patrons of Le Divan Lepelletier had enjoyed its “strong liqueurs.” The brasserie was better known for serving beer, which had recently been introduced from Germany in the late 1840’s. Its popularity grew as provincial Frenchmen and foreigners from Germany and Great Britain journeyed to Paris and brought with them an affinity for beer. For the Realist painters, who were committed to portraying the stark realities of life, no
matter how gritty or unpleasant, the atmosphere of the brasserie was a perfect backdrop. Beer was often associated with rural life and peasant characters.\textsuperscript{20} Also, the interior of the brasserie usually had a more rustic appearance. While the physical appearance of the brasserie differed from the café, the intellectual atmosphere was just as lively. The Brasserie Andler became a favorite spot for Courbet and his cohorts. This “Beer House of the Realists,” was located at 32 rue Hautefeuille near his studio in the Latin Quarter.\textsuperscript{21} Realist writer Champfleury’s description of the brasserie gives an idea of the appearance of the interior:

“...by chance the interior had a Protestant rural look that corresponded with the doctrines invoked by the faithful. It was a beer-house kept in the German style: wood benches and tables, a long paved room, whitewashed walls, a complete absence of any mirrors or divans...”\textsuperscript{22}
Another clue to the appearance of the establishment is a woodcut image of the brasserie done by Courbet (Figure 1).


In the left foreground there is a group of men and women seated at a large, rectangular table. Behind this table is another with a similar gathering of patrons. In the center of the room is a stove, probably heated by either wood or coal. The stovepipe goes directly up into a high ceiling. In the right foreground there is another grouping of people around a table. Behind this group we see the bar where a man is speaking to the bartender. In this front room, a single gaslight hangs from the ceiling, casting shadows around the room. The stovepipe casts a particularly long shadow against the ceiling. Through a large archway there are billiard tables. A figure leans over the table to make a shot. There is a
dark figure leaning against the wall in the opening of the archway watching the game. Four other figures are seen in this backroom. Two more gas lamps hang over the billiard tables. A third lamp is just barely seen behind the left side of the arch. The ambiance of the brasserie is fairly stark. The walls are bare save the rectangular outline on the left wall behind the tables. There also appears to be a niche behind the bar.

A sketch, also done by Courbet, gives a more detailed look at the café (Figure 2).

2. Gustave Courbet, Detail of a sketch.

Three men sit around a small wooden table in a corner. The man in the center is Courbet himself. He sits, hunched over and slightly pushed back from the table. His dark hair falls over his forehead and he holds a pipe in his teeth. He does not appear to be participating in
the conversation between the two other men at his table. Perhaps he is concentrating on his drawing, as he would at the Brasserie des Martyrs. The two men at his table are in a discussion. The figure at the left is Marc Trapadoux, a student and friend of Henri Mürger. He is wearing a top hat and coat. He leans intently on the table, with his chin resting on one hand and his other arm resting on the table. The figure on the right is Jean Ballois, who also wears a hat and coat. He holds something, perhaps a pipe, in his right hand, and rests his left hand on his leg. His eyes appear to be closed. A pitcher of beer and three pint glasses are on the table. In the background, a hat hangs on a hook. We can also see part of another figure on the left side of the sketch. Courbet’s sketch gives us an idea of the interaction between the intellectuals that frequented the brasserie. The Brasserie Andler would not be the only beer house the Realists would use as a meeting place.

Les Brasserie des Martyrs, located on the rue des Martyrs, was also popular with the Bohemian crowd. The patrons of the Brasserie de Martyrs were a lowly bunch. One writer described the clientele:

“The weavers of rhymes, the poetasters still damp from the nest, the penniless philosophers

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indifferent to money, the hunters of pictures, the chasers of words, the roving artists of pen or brush, nearly all of them suffering more or less acutely from Panurge’s disease: lack of money.”

Like the Brasserie Andler, the Brasserie de Martyrs was no place for fashionable Paris society. There was no further extreme from the formal studios of the Academy instructors, which made it a perfect haven for Courbet and his realist disciples. It was in this environment that the traditional painting approaches of the previous decades would again come under attack. The young author Edmond Duranty spoke out against the Romanticists when he wrote of the abundance of:

“Greek visions, Roman visions, medieval visions, visions of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, with the 19th century absolutely forbidden! The man of antiquity created what he saw, create what you see!”

Oddly enough, Courbet was rarely a participant in the heated discussions that went on in the name of his rebellious art. He was mostly content to sit and listen to the debates while drawing at his table.

Claude Monet, in the early 1860’s, heard his first discussion on
the new styles while sitting at La Brasserie des Martyrs. He actually preferred the rustic brasserie as a place to learn about art and life rather than the teachings of the École des Beaux Arts.²⁷

Standing in contrast to the rustic ambiance of the brasseries of the Realists was the Café Tortoni. The café enjoyed the patronage of the more fashionable members of Paris society. Bourgeois ladies and gentlemen, the type who attended the opera and strolled down the Champs-Elysees, often stopped at the Café Tortoni. There are several depictions of the café, all confirming its reputation as a more upscale establishment. The first, a drawing done in 1836, offers a description of the café (Figure 3).

3. Frances Trollope, Paris and the Parisians, illustration from the book, 1836. In the left foreground, a well-dressed man and woman are seated, having a conversation. The man has a top hat and
cane. The woman wears a fashionable bonnet and holds a parasol. A young street urchin stands in front of them and appears to be playing a musical instrument, perhaps for money. In the left front of the image a typical Parisian dandy stands. He wears a long coat with a fur-lined collar. In his left hand he holds his hat and cane. With his right arm he lifts a comb to his dark wavy hair. Above the lady and gentlemen the word Italien is written denoting the café’s location on the fashionable Boulevard des Italiens. Just beyond are two more gentlemen having a conversation. They also wear coats and hats. Above them is a shuttered window with the sign “Tortoni” over it. In the front of the café is a long awning. Beneath this a lady in a bonnet is speaking to a gentleman in the doorway. Beyond these figures are two gentlemen seated at one of the outside tables on the sidewalk. It is evident by this drawing and by descriptions of the Café Tortoni that it was not, as compared to la brasserie, much an arena for heated artistic discussions. The patrons of the café were more interested in the small talk of polite society. Two disgruntled artists shouting insults at each other while standing on tables was not a situation that would have been accepted at the Café Tortoni.
A second depiction, a lithograph by Eugene Guerard, gives a more detailed view of the Café Tortoni (Figure 4).

4. Eugène Guérard, physiognomies of Paris, no. 4: The Boulevard des Italiens (the Tortoni, 4:o’clock in the evening), 1856.

The scene is outside the café, where patrons crowd the wide sidewalk. Men, all in top hats and frock coats dominate the crowd. Only three women appear: one in front view, one in profile and the last with her back to the viewer. All are very fashionably dressed. They serve as the only real color in the picture in lovely pinks and blues and yellows. They are each engaged in conversation with a well-dressed gentleman. In the lower right hand corner, two men are also engaged in conversation. They are both in profile. The speaker is emphatically making a point. His hands are raised toward
the other’s face and he leans forward with mouth open. The other figure is more casual. He is in a casual stance, hands in pockets and a cigar in his mouth. These two are the least fashionably dressed of the crowd. A second pairing of men appears in the lower left-hand corner. They are a more upscale pair than the men on the right. They are both in black coats, top hats and vests. The plumper man carries a cane. They are not really engaged in conversation, rather, the taller man leans his head slightly back and whispers into the other’s ear, giving the appearance that he is making some sly comment on something he has just seen. The rest of the patrons are mixed in a jumble of activity. The green tables are cluttered with glasses. One man reads the paper, while another lifts his glass and looks over as if to listen in on the conversation at the next table. A busy waiter moves through the crowd carrying two coffeepots. A pale blue awning hangs down over the front of the café and the letters “TORTO” appear above. Behind the crowd is a coachman with carriage and three horses. Beyond this is a sea of top hats moving down the boulevard toward the café. The overall atmosphere is lively and lighthearted.

Although the Café Tortoni was not the free wheeling intellectual headquarters that Le Divan Lepelletier and
the brasseries were, it did find favor with one very important modern artist - Edouard Manet. The atmosphere of the Café Tortoni suited Manet much more than the brasserie. He was certainly more of a haute bourgeoisie and a dandy than a bohemian or a working-class Realist. His top hat and waistcoat blended in splendidly with the patrons of Tortoni’s. None could have guessed by his appearance the style of Manet’s art. To look at him, anyone would guess that he was tied to the Academy. This assumption could not have been more wrong.

Endnotes

3Hebert, pg. 3. Hebert provides a description of many of the changes occurring under the Haussmann project. In addition to the Rue Rivoli, many other streets were widened, lengthened and connected. The boulevard Saint-Michel that ran through the Latin Quarter was joined by the Boulevard Sebastopol, extending it northward. The years 1852–1863 saw the completion of eight new bridges as well as the rebuilding of many others. Hebert explains how the Seine was opened up by the removal of many shops and other structures along the river. This provided a more pleasant open atmosphere, which in turn led to an increase in commerce and tourism.
5Herbert, p. 65.
10Rewald, p. 20.
11Ibid.
14Bernier, p. 14. The original article appeared in the daily on October 20th, 1859.
15Bernier, p. 15.
16Bernier, p. 16.
18Richardson, p. 113.
19Herbert, p. 66.
20Hebert, p. 66.
21Bernier, p. 18.
22Ibid.
23Rewald, p. 25.
24Richardson, Joanna La Vie Parisienne (London; Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1971) p. 101
26Ibid.
27Rewald, p. 38
28Bernier, p. 28.
Chapter II The Impressionist’s Café Scene: Café Guerbois and La Nouvelle Athènes: 1860-1880

Edouard Manet was emerging as a leader of a new modern style. It was an art style that seemed to answer the call of the poet Charles Baudelaire, who challenged artists to put aside history and mythology and look to the modern city around them for inspiration. Manet would not be the only artist to accept Baudelaire’s sentiments about the “heroism of modern life.” By the mid-1860’s, he had a following of young artists who shared many of his views on art. For Manet and his followers there would be a new place where they could meet to debate their ideas. Montmartre, at the edge of the city and still untouched by many of the changes of modern Paris, would become their home. In the 1860’ and 1870’s, artists like Manet, Degas and Renoir lived, worked and found great inspiration there.

Artists of this period gravitated to Montmartre for a number of reasons. The area had been annexed to Paris in 1860 and this led to a growth of new buildings with artist’s studios filling the top floors. At the same time, Montmartre retained a certain rural quality, especially near the top of the Butte. This quality drew those artists whose greatest interests lay in the study
of nature.\textsuperscript{2} A contemporary of the Impressionists wrote in 1899:

“It is impossible to take your luncheon on the Boulevards and visit Montmartre afterwards without imagining that you are the victim of some hallucination. One minute the roar and rattle of the traffic - the clanging of the bells on the steam-cars, and the hooting of the automobiles -and then an old - world quiet. The impression grows upon you that it is a village that has strayed, and once locked up within the fortifications could not get out again.”\textsuperscript{3}

More important, was the free-and-easy atmosphere of the area. It was a place of free thinkers, writers and artists.\textsuperscript{4} Montmartre must have been irresistible to any young artists who craved an environment of modern thinking. A young Auguste Renoir commented on his move to the base of Montmartre:

“To tell the truth, many memories still tied me to the Left Bank, but I was aware of the danger of letting my painting become imbued with that rather peculiar atmosphere so aptly defined by Degas, when he said of
Fantin-Latour: ‘Yes, no doubt what he does is very good. But what a pity it’s a little bit Left Bank.’ So when I rented a studio in the Rue Saint-Georges that year, I felt that I’d arrived.’

For these young artists, Montmartre seemed to be a symbol of everything that was modern and forward thinking in art. It was everything that the Academy was not.

Manet took up residence on the Rue des Batignolles, located just southwest of the center of the Montmartre district. Interestingly enough, some of Manet’s neighbors were the most well respected members of the Academy. Alexandre Cabanal, Jean-Léon Gérôme and Thomas Couture all lived in the area. It was in the district that he encountered many of the figure types seen in some of his earlier works: ragpickers, street musicians and those living on the outer edges of polite society.

Manet’s success in his new modern style began to draw the attention of other artists who formed the Batignolles Group. Like Courbet and his realist followers, Manet’s followers were drawn to a café as the center of their artistic discussions and debate, as well as their social lives. Their place was the Café Guerbois at 11 (9) Grande Rue des Batignolles.
The names associated with the Café Guerbois read like a future Impressionist retrospective. Yet at this time, many were still finding their style. Writers, many who came to be considered greats of their time, accompanied these artists. Edmond Bazire recounted the members of the group in his book on Manet published in 1884:

“There were about twelve of them... A. Legros, Whistler, Fantin-Latour would be joined by the writers Babou, Gignaux, Duranty, Zola; the engraver Belloc who was to be immortalized in Manet’s Le Bon Bock; another engraver, Desboutin, who was equally well known at the time as a painter though less so as an artist’s model; a painter, Guillemet; an orientalist, Tobar; a universalist, Zacharie Astruc, who wielded the paintbrush, the chisel and the pen with equal passion, and finally, the latter arrivals, Degas. Renoir, Monet, Pissarro.”
Further documentation of the members of the group is provided in a painting done by Théodore Fantin-Latour in 1870 (Figure 5).


Titled, The Studio at Les Batignolles, Fantin-Latour depicts the images of members of the group. He discusses the painting:

“When the present-day stupidities have finally given way to those of the future, and when the aversion for Manet has blown over, my picture will be regarded simply as a studio interior with a painter making the portrait of a friend with other friends around him.”

The painter seated in the center of the canvas is Edouard Manet. The model posed in front of him is Zacharie
Astruc, known to be a strong supporter of Manet’s new style of painting. Behind Manet, hands in pockets, is the German artist, Schölderer. The man behind Manet, wearing a hat, is Auguste Renoir. The grouping in the right corner consists of Emile Zola, Edmond Maître, Frédéric Bazille and Claude Monet in the corner.¹⁰

Unfortunately, there is little known about the physical appearance of Café Guerbois. A lithograph done in 1869 by Manet gives some idea of the café interior (Figure 6).

6. Edouard Manet, The Café Guerbois, lithograph, 1869. It shows a group of men gathered at a table, while another figure stands over them. A top hat and a coat hang on the rack behind the table. To the right, a typically dressed café waiter stands over the table as if waiting to take their order. Behind him, we see another
man leaning against the bar, smoking a pipe. Over his head hangs a gaslight. At the lower edge of the lithograph and inscription reads “Interior au Café Guerbois.”

The interior of the café was more fully described by literary contemporaries of the Batignolles Group. In his short story, *La double vue de Louis Seguin*, Edmond Duranty gives a detailed description of the interior of the café. He changes the name of the café slightly, referring to it as the Barbois café. His description contains numerous religious allusions.

The café also receives literary mention in Emile Zola’s novel, *The Masterpiece*, 1886. Although, like Duranty, he renames it:

“The café Baudequin was situated on the Boulevard des Batignolles, at the corner of the Rue Darcet. Without the least why or wherefore, it had been selected by the band as their meeting place, though Gagnière alone lived in the neighborhood. They met there regularly on Sunday nights; and on Thursday afternoons, at about five o’clock, those who were then at liberty had made it a habit to look in for a moment.”
Thursdays were a regular meeting day for the group, although at any given time an artist could find company and conversation at the café. On Friday evenings, two tables were reserved for the group on the left near the entrance of the café. A letter from Manet to his friend Emile Zola supports this:

“[To Emile Zola], I forgot to send you Champfluery’s address. It’s 20 rue de Boulonge[for Bruxelles]. Do come to the Café Guerbois on Friday evening, but not too late.”

In these café meetings the early ideas of modern art grew stronger and more focused. The atmosphere was the ideal catalyst for the formulation of new ideas. Later in his life, Monet remembered fondly his days at the Café Guerbois:

“Nothing could be more interesting than these causeries with their perpetual clash of opinions. They kept our wits sharpened, they encouraged us with stores of enthusiasm that for weeks and weeks kept us up until the final shaping if the idea was accomplished. From them we emerged tempered more highly, with a
firm will, with our thoughts clearer and more distinct."\textsuperscript{16}

Also important for the artists at the Café Guerbois was the feeling of camaraderie. For all their differences in personality, and even artistic theory, they were united in their desire for a change. They shared a common disdain for the Academy and the juried salons. They had all felt the sting of rejection and the frustration of depending on the system they despised to gain any attention in the art world. For these artists the café was a safe house. In this refuge, the Batignolles group could discuss how to get their work noticed by the public.

One of the most important events to arise from the discussions at the Café Guerbois was the first Impressionist exhibit of 1874. The idea of putting together an independent show was resurrected out of a certain sense of desperation. In the previous year, the little group had finally enjoyed some success. The art dealer Durand-Ruel had taken notice of their paintings and published a large catalog featuring paintings by Manet, Pissarro, Monet, Sisley and Degas.\textsuperscript{17} They also had modest success at auctions where works by Pissarro, Sisley, Monet and Degas went for a good price.\textsuperscript{18} But, this
bit of good fortune was closely followed by a setback for the group. In early 1874, due to financial troubles, Durand-Ruel was forced to suspend all acquisitions, as well as sell off many works in his collection at a loss.\textsuperscript{19} The Batignolles group could no longer depend on the support of the dealer. Without this support, the group felt it more important than ever that they have a public exhibition.

From the very beginning, there were differing opinions in the group as to how the show should be put together. The group argued over whether there should even be an independent exhibit at all. Manet remained steadfast that acceptance at the Salon, no matter how unjust the system was, was the only way to achieve public standing. He tried to convince Morisot, Renoir and Monet of the same: “Why don’t you stay with me? You can see very well that I am on the right track.”\textsuperscript{20} The journalist Theodore Duret also argued that Salon success was the right course to follow. He acknowledged the gains of the Hoschede auction, but felt that it was an inadequate achievement. The group would only achieve true recognition through acceptance at the Salon.\textsuperscript{21}

In spite of discouragement, even from some of their own members, the majority of the Batignolles group went
ahead with the exhibit. Other matters had to be settled: who to invite, where to hold the exhibition, even how to hang the works. In the end, the group decided on Nadar’s recently vacated photographic studio (Figure 7).

7. Photograph of Nadar’s Studio, 35 Boulevard de Capucines.

They began to recruit participants and when everything was finally settled, the show opened on April 15, 1874. The show was by no means a triumph. The group suffered harsh criticism from the public as well as art critics.
Someone joked that “these painters’ methods consisted in loading a pistol with several tubes of paint and firing it at a canvas, then finishing it off with a signature.”

The independents may not have come about if the artists had not had a place outside the Academy where they could bolster their confidence and plan their show. The café gave them the freedom to be independent artists, even if it meant facing hurdles. Their little group offered the support to bear the harsh criticism and public opinions. A solitary artist would not have been as able to defy the system.

In the years following the first Impressionist exhibition, things did not get any easier for the Impressionist artists. They were still struggling with poverty, and their works had been rejected by art critics and the public. Only a handful of collectors and critics gave them support. The fledgling Impressionists depended on each other for financial and moral support.
By 1875, there was a new café where many of the Impressionist group would meet. They followed Marcellin Desboutin, to La Nouvelle Athènes on the Place Pigalle (Figure 8).

8. Postcard of La Nouvelle Athènes.

Renoir, Manet and Degas were the most regular visitors from the original Batignolles group. Jean Louis Forain was also a frequent visitor. They were accompanied by their contemporaries in literature and art criticism: the engraver Henri Guerard, Edmond Duranty, Armand Sylvestre, Philip Burty.

A sketch done by J.L. Forain in 1876 depicts the interior of the café. Although it does not provide a
detailed image of the interior, it gives a sense of the atmosphere of the café (Figure 9).

9. Jean Louis Forain, Café de La Nouvelle Athènes, etching, c. 1876.

In the foreground of the drawing a café table is cropped off by the bottom edge, giving the feeling that the viewer is seated at the table and observing the action in the café. At the next table, three gentlemen are seated in a row, all in top hats. The first holds a newspaper that blocks the action of the second two. The viewer is not able to tell whether they are also reading, or just seated quietly at the table. They are not engaged in conversation, but seem unaware of each other. Their
backs are to a mirror that reflects the first man’s top hat, as well as the ceiling lights overhead. To the left of the drawing a women stands with her back to the viewer and her head slightly turned to the right so that her profile is in view. Her hair is swept up from her shoulders and she wears a small hat. Just beyond, a waiter, denoted by the typical black jacket and white apron is seen in profile. He appears to be moving across the room as if going from the kitchen or the bar, back into the café. Above there are top hats and coats hanging on hooks in the wall. In the background there are two more non-descript figures. The first is seen over the left shoulder of the women. It is another gentleman in a top hat. The second is seen just over the top of the newspaper. Forain’s sketchy style gives the drawing a sense of action and spontaneity, which allows the viewer a feeling of the lively hustle and bustle atmosphere of the café. You can almost hear the clinking of glasses, rustling of chairs and the steady sound of conversation.

One of the most regular literary patrons to La Nouvelle Athènes was the Irish author George Moore. It is from his writings that we get the most detailed descriptions of the interior of the café. In his novel,
Confessions of a Young Man, 1904, Moore describes the café atmosphere:

“I can hear the glass door of the café grate on the sand as I open it. I can recall the smell of every hour. In the morning that of eggs frizzling in butter, the pungent cigarette, coffee and bad cognac; at five o’clock the fragrant odor of absinthe; and soon after the steaming soup ascends from the kitchen; and as the evening advances, the mingled smells of cigarettes, coffee and weak beer. A partition, rising a few feet or more over the hats, separates the glass front from the main body of the café. The usual marble tables are there, and it is there we sat and aestheticised till two o’clock in the morning.24

George Moore was an eager participant in the discussions that took place at La Nouvelle Athènes, which were just as lively as they had been at the Café Guerbois. Manet is remembered as being “loud and declamatory”, while Degas was “sharp, more profound, and scornfully sarcastic.” Duranty was “clearheaded, dry full of repressed disappointment. Pissarro “sat
listening, approving of their ideas, joining in the conversation quietly.”

There are several literary references to the discussions that took place between the artists at La Nouvelle Athènes. A letter from Paul Alexis to Emile Zola written in 1879 recounts one such discussion:

“The other day, there was a big discussion about a congress on the arts that had been announced. Manet said he wanted to go there, get up and make a speech and overthrow the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Pissarro, who was listening, was vaguely worried; Duranty, like a wise nestor, brought him back down to earth.”

In 1904, Moore wrote in remembrance, the importance of the discussions at the café:

“I did not go to either Oxford or Cambridge, but I went to La Nouvelle Athènes... though unacknowledged, though unknown, the influence of the Nouvelle Athènes is inveterate in the artistic thought of the nineteenth century.”

Like the Café Guerbois and those that preceded it, La Nouvelle Athènes played an important role in the development of modern art. Though its artistic patrons were rarely in agreement, the café served as a place to
develop ideas away from the inflexible stance of the Salon. It is also at this time, that artists began to portray café life in their works. They studied the café and its patrons as symbols of modern life.

For all the time the new modern artists spent in the café, it was not until the late 1870’s that they began to portray it in their art. Quick sketches and impressions had been done, such as Manet’s interior of the Café Guerbois, but no complete works. Until this point, the artists had been focused on other subjects they considered to be symbols of the new modern Paris. However, no one so involved as the artists in the café life could ignore its position in modern Parisian culture. A. Morand wrote in *La vie de Paris*, 1855, that the café was “one of the great elements of Parisian life, and 30,000 individuals would hang themselves on Sunday night if they were closed, as in London.” For artists like Manet and Degas who sought out subjects that embodied the idea of “modern life,” the patrons of the café were fitting subjects. The café atmosphere was an arena where the artists could witness many of the social issues of the time.

The café had become more and more popular among the working class in the latter part of the nineteenth
century. They often turned to the café for food, drink and camaraderie. During the course of the day, a laborer could visit the café before work, at noon for an aperitif, after lunch for a digestif, and after work during the “hour of absinthe.” The increasing alcoholic consumption among working class café patrons was another issue of great concern at the time. Since the mid-century, laborers had broadened their drinking beyond wine to include beer, absinthe, Vermouth, Byrrh, rum or eau-de-vie. Between 1840 and 1870, alcoholic consumption tripled.

The increasing population of working class citizens frequenting cafes even attracted attention outside France. In 1885, a U.S. government labor report warned:

“These restaurants, being the resort of all unemployed men, are a danger alike to public health and morals, being the home of outcasts of society, honest workmen are thrown in contact with them.”

The presence of working class Parisians could not have escaped the attention of their fellow artist patrons. Artists like Manet and Degas had a keen sense of observation. As artists, they took on the role of the flâneur, recording things as they saw them. Their
paintings expressed a spontaneous moment in time, almost like a snapshot.

Edouard Manet had long since been recognized as a master at portraying the modern consciousness of Paris. His first café painting, *At the Café*, was done in 1878 (Figure 10).

10. Edouard Manet, *At the Café*, oil on canvas, 1878. The painting captures a small slice of the café atmosphere that Manet and his fellow artist patrons would have been witness. A woman is seated in the center of the painting. She looks directly at the viewer, one hand resting on a chair, and the other folded across her lap. She has a slight smile, which makes her feelings difficult to discern. Perhaps it is a reaction to her
companion seated beside her. His mouth is slightly open, yet he does not engage the woman in conversation. Manet creates a disconnect between the two figures, even though their close proximity and the man’s right arm resting on the back of her chair shows that they are together.

Another strong aspect of detachment in the painting is created between the couple and the young girl seated at the bar next to the gentleman. She sits in profile, her head set off by the white of the window. Herbert states that perhaps she is their daughter, and that Manet is commenting on the relationship between an adolescent and their parents. Other elements in the painting lend to its modern, real-life quality, as if Manet has captured a single moment of action. He crops the edges, adding to the picture’s photographic quality. The rapid brushstrokes add to the spontaneity of the painting, and are in definite contrast to the fine surfaces of Academy style painting. At the left of the painting a waitress leans over, perhaps serving a drink to the gentleman seated there. Both figure’s faces are cut off by the edge of the painting and are unknown to the viewer. Two glasses of beer sit on the bar in front of the couple. As stated before, beer was quickly gaining popularity among the bourgeois class. Manet offers us a glimpse at
the theater of café life that he and his fellow artist patrons frequented.

Like Manet, Edgar Degas was an artist-flâneur who closely examined the modern culture of Paris. In his painting *Women on a Café Terrace, Evening*, Degas offers a different view of the café (Figure 11).


His scene takes place outside the café, on the boulevard Montmartre. One of the attractions of the café was that patrons could take advantage of the outside seating afforded to the café by the widened boulevards of the Haussmann project. Haussmann’s project also created a vast extension of gaslight, which allowed patrons to remain outside at night. In this painting, Degas examines a different type of café patron. Unlike Manet’s bourgeois characters, the women in his painting are
believed to be prostitutes. The central figure is seated at a small round table. She gestures with her thumb to her mouth. This gesture has been interpreted in different ways, mostly relating to her role as a prostitute. On viewing the pastel in 1877, when it was originally exhibited, Georges Rivière commented that she was saying “not even this much!” as though she has not had a customer all evening. The woman seated across the small table from her is turned slightly, revealing to the viewer her low-cut dress. Two female figures are also seen to the left of the picture. The first appears to be rising from her chair. Our view of her is partially obscured by a column that rises the height of the work. The second woman is in profile. One of the most intriguing elements of the painting is a shadowy figure that is disappearing behind one of the terrace walls. His presence adds to the psychological tension that is present in many of Degas’ works. Degas’ image of the café captures another side of café life. He retains the detached view of an observer or, as Hebert writes, “an investigator.” In this way, he records for the viewer, as if in a photograph, a small slice of the interactions and dynamic of the café. The new tempo and nervous energy of reconstructed Paris abound in the paintings of
the Early Impressionist period. Baudelaire’s summons to embrace the “heroism of modern life” is answered.

Endnotes

2Buisson, p. 20.
3Richardson, p. 154.
5Buisson, p. 17.
6Buisson, p. 24-25.
7Herbert, p. 63.
10Ibid.
12Bernier, p. 38-40. Bernier translates an excerpt from the original short story reprinted in the Dec. 1976 Gazette des Beaux Arts. The complete description is as follows: “Founded a long time ago in what was then a village on the outskirts of the city, it has partially preserved its former provincial aspect, its old-fashioned decoration in the Empire style. When the village was annexed the cafe took on a Parisian air in some of the rooms. The first room, white and gold, full of mirrors, shot through with light, looks like the terrace of a boulevard cafe. But the moment you enter the second room, the place becomes astounding. You are in a vast crypt with a low ceiling. In the entrance six squat columns make up an avenue, dividing this crypt into two narrow chapels, behind which the billiard room extends like a choir. Great panes of glass, irregularly cut into the ceiling, here very broad, there narrow like small skylights, give a shifting light, and create everywhere mysteriously illuminated recesses, deep long shadows sliced through by bursts of light that fix themselves to the bulge of a column, the end of a table or of a red banquette, the gleaming bald head of a piquet player, a waiter’s white apron. Up to middle-height, the walls have a brown, “Protestant” color. There are no mirrors, nothing with gilt. Five billiard tables, the bulky baptismal fonts of this temple, display their green velvet in mock perspective, absorbing the light. At the end there is a large pane of glass, pointing up the whole length of the room. It reveals in full light a garden with a few young trees, between which there appears a little house with small columns, painted a delicate green. The garden springs fresh, alive intense, behind the half-light of the cafe interior. It is Dutch, it is unique, it is indeed very far from Paris.”
14Buisson, p. 32.
16Rewald, p. 169.
17Rewald, p. 250. The members of the Batignolles group were just a small part of the catalog, but were in very good company. Other artists featured were Corot, Millet, Delacroix, Rousseau, Troyon, Diaz and Courbet.
18Ibid. Rewald states that the high price received for the works was probably due to a period of financial prosperity following the Prussian War.
19Rewald, p. 252 Durand-Ruel fell on hard times when a depression hit France in late 1873. Rewald also states that he had accumulated a large amount of unsaleable stock, which also contributed to his financial problems. To add to this, Durand Ruel’s support of the Batignolles group had lost him the respect of other art dealers at the time.
20Rewald, p. 254. Manet had recently enjoyed some success at the Salon of 1873 with Le Bon Bock, a portrait of the engraver Belloc at the Cafe Guerbois. Manet never lost his desire to be recognized by the Salon jury. He did not participate in the group’s first exhibition.
21Rewald, P. 252. Duret wrote to Pissarro on February 15, 1874. The excerpt reads: “The Hoschede sale did you more good and advanced you further than all the special exhibitions imaginable. It brought you before a mixed and numerous public. I urge you strongly to round that out by exhibiting this year at the Salon. Considering what the frame of mind seems to be this year, your name now being known, they won’t refuse you. Besides, you can send three pictures- of the three, one or two will certainly be accepted. -Among the 40,000 people who, I suppose visit the Salon, you’ll be seen by fifty dealers, patrons, critics who would never otherwise look you up and discover you. Even if you only achieve that, it would be enough. But you’ll gain more, because you are now in a special position in a group that is being discussed and that is beginning to be accepted, although with reservations. I urge you to select pictures that have a subject, something resembling a composition, pictures that are not too freshly painted, that are already a bit staid...I urge you the exhibit; you must succeed in making a noise, in defying and attracting criticism, coming face to face with the big public. You won’t achieve all that accept at the Salon.”
22Rewald. p. 256. Rewald also has a full list of the participants in this first exhibition, many of whom are know virtually unknowns: Astruc, Attendu, Belliard, Boudin, Bracquemond, F., Brandon, Bureau, Cals, Cezanne, Colin, Degas, Debras, Guillaumin, Latouche, Lepic, Lepine, Levert, Meyer, de Molins, Monet, Morisot, Mulot-Durivage, de Nittis, Ottin, A., Ottin, L.A., Pissarro, Renoir, Robert, Rouart and Sisley.
23Ibid.
24Moore, George, Confessions of a Young Man (New York: Brentano’s, 1901) p. 75.
26Oberthur, p. 41.
27Moore, p. 75.

Barrows, p. 21.

Barrows attributes the increasing consumption of alcohol to several things. First, the prices of wine liquor and beer dropped significantly by the mid-nineteenth century. What had once been a luxury reserved for special occasions was now affordable on a daily basis. Second, a botanical disease called phylloxera attacked French vineyards. The disease devastated the wine crops. The French turned to other beverages in place wine and even when the production of wine was back to normal, the French did not lose their taste for the beer and liquor.

Haine, p. 151.

Hebert, p. 71.

Hebert, p. 66.

Ibid.

Hebert, p. 45. Hebert reasons that based on the women’s dress, as well as eyewitness accounts of the boulevard Montmartre at this time. It is known that prostitutes would often solicit men who were shopping or attending the theaters in the area.

Hebert, p. 45. Hebert provides Rivière’s full quote on Degas on p. 18: “[Degas] is an observer; he never seeks exaggeration; the effect is always obtained from nature herself, without caricature. That is what makes him the most valuable historian of the scenes he shows us... Over here are some women at the entrance of café, in the evening. One of them strikes her thumbnail against her teeth while saying ‘not even that much,’ which is quite a poem... In the background is the boulevard whose bustle is diminishing little by little. This is another really extraordinary page of history.”

Hebert, p. 45.
More than anything else, the drink-drug absinthe highlights the intertwining of Parisian cafés and advanced modern art late in the nineteenth century. Absinthe had surely become more than just a popular liquor by the end of the nineteenth century. It was a phenomenon with many implications in French culture, especially to artists and writers. Since the French soldiers returned from the Algerian war with a taste for the substance, its popularity had risen steadily in France. It was known as “La Fée Verte” or the green fairy.\(^1\) The hour of 7:00 p.m. became known as l’heure verte and the popular cafés of Paris were full of patrons enjoying their luminous green aperitif.\(^2\) There was a certain ritual involved in absinthe drinking that had quite an appealing quality. The clear green absinthe was poured over ice. Using a special spoon, a cube of sugar was suspended over the glass. Cold water was poured over the sugar cube softening the bitter taste of the wormwood in the absinthe and transforming the drink into a pale luminous yellow liquid.\(^3\) Absinthe was gaining favor among the working class citizens of Paris. The decreasing cost of absinthe and the increasing amount of leisure time among the Parisian working class made it possible to spend more time in the cafés. It was common to see a
workingman, or woman, drowning their troubles in a glass of absinthe.

Another group drawn to absinthe was the intellectual class. Writers, poets and artists were drinking more than their fair share of the green aperitif. Legends such as Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud all had problems with absinthe addiction. Baudelaire struggled with his addiction, even though he knew the danger of it. In 1862, he wrote in his journal, "I have cultivated my hysteria with delight and terror. Now I suffer continually from vertigo, and today, 23 of January 1862, I have received a singular warning, I have felt the wind of the wing of madness pass over me." The poet Verlaine had similar problems with his addiction (Figure 12).

12. Photograph of Paul Verlaine.

He struggled with this throughout his career. In the end
he was a pathetic figure, wandering from bar to bar, maintaining his absinthe induced stupor. His constant drinking took a heavy toll on his life, leaving him a weak and sickly man. He died penniless and with no respect as a poet; a tragic end for such a brilliant mind. The poet Rimbaud embraced the hallucinogenic effects of absinthe as a means for releasing the creative spirit. He believed intoxication was a necessary tool to free the imagination. Rimbaud wrote of his affinity for absinthe:

“There is a drinking place I prefer: long live L’Academie d’Absomphe, in spite of the ill-temper of the waters! It is the most delicate and trembling of all vestments, this drunkenness by virtue the sagebrush of the glaciers, absomphe!”

However, after a series of tragic events he experienced with his companion Verlaine, Rimbaud too saw the danger of the maddening effects of the drink. He gave up absinthe drinking for good.

The relationship between absinthe and madness became fairly common. Accounts of absinthe-induced hysteria were widespread. There were numerous stories of men being sent to asylums, ruining their lives, and destroying their families, all due to their absinthe addictions. Medical and scientific research argued, “absinthism was a disease that produced hallucinations,
convulsions of an epileptic nature, and finally a particularly brutal and violent form of insanity.”

The ideas of depravity and insanity became inexorably tied to absinthe. A slang term for absinthe was “une correspondance pour Chareton” meaning a ticket to Chareton which was an insane asylum outside France.

The increasing consumption of absinthe drinking among the French, particularly Parisians, led to an equally increasing temperance movement. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, there was a strong campaign to have the liquor banned. Fueled by reports of the detrimental effects that absinthe had on those addicted to it, anti-alcoholism politicians presented their arguments to the legislature. Henri Schmidt, deputy from Vosges, and a well-known adversary of absinthe declared to the National Assembly:

“We’re not attacking the hour of the aperitif, this agreeable moment of détente. We are attacking the erosion of the national defense. The abolition of absinthe and the national defense are the same. What is necessary is trench warfare against absinthism!”
He went on to argue:

"The real characteristic of absinthe is that it leads straight to the madhouse of the courthouse. It is truly ‘madness in a bottle’ and no habitual drinker can claim that he will not become a criminal."\(^{14}\) Absinthe was blamed for a number of problems including a drop in birth rate, an increase in suicides and an increase in hereditary defects. These claims were used to support the temperance movement’s efforts to have the liquor banned.\(^{15}\)

Absinthe proponents were quick to defend their industry. They challenged the anti-alcoholic movement’s claims that absinthe caused madness and criminal behavior by surveying the inmates in asylums and the cause of their confinement. For instance, statistics were taken in the region of Pontarlier, center of the absinthe producing industry.\(^{16}\) "The director of the asylum at Doubs reported that ‘of 190 hospitalized men, only forty-two were alcoholic and of these not one could be called an absinthe drinker.’\(^{17}\) Profits for the absinthe producers were enormous and tax revenues for the government impressive\(^{18}\). Pro-absinthe forces were formidable. The debate went on in this manner for some
years. Each time an anti-absinthe bill came up it was defeated.¹⁹

With this kind of influence over Paris society, it is not surprising that many of the artists of the time chose absinthe as a subject in their painting. This was especially true among the Impressionists who place great value on images of everyday Parisian life. Absinthe was certainly part of this everyday life. One of the earliest works done by Edouard Manet is titled, *The Absinthe Drinker* (Figure 13).

![Image of The Absinthe Drinker](image)

It shows a common ragpicker in a ragged cloak and top hat. He is not a humble figure, rather, he has “an expression that is both defiant and contemplative.” He is certainly not one of the humble poor. There is little color in the painting, save the opalescent green glass of absinthe at his side. An empty bottle by his feet suggests that this is probably not his first glass. He holds his head high, seemingly unashamed at his public drinking.

It was an image that was becoming more widespread in Paris. Turn of the century writer, H.P. Hugh described the commonplace scene:

“The sickly odor of absinthe lies heavily in the air. The ‘absinthe’ hour of the Boulevards begins vaguely at half-past-five, and it ends just as vaguely at half-past-seven; but on the hill it never ends. Not that it is a home of the drunkard in any way; but the deadly opal drink lasts longer than anything else, and it is the aim of Montmartre to stop as long as possible on the terrasse of a café and watch the world go by.”
Jean-François Raffaelli painted another image of absinthe (Figure 14).


He portrays two male absinthe drinkers. There is no real human contact between them. One rests his head in his hand and looks off behind the other’s back. The second man looks away, out towards the viewer. Their clothes and shoes signify that they are also from the working class. The picture has the same subtle coloring that will be seen in Degas’ *L’Absinthe*. The men’s garments are reminiscent of Manet’s ragpicker.
In 1876, Edgar Degas painted one of the most famous images of a café interior known today (Figure 15).


Imbued with the psychological undertones common in his work, Degas paints a powerful image of the working class and the café. Two figures sit side by side at a table. Despite their position, they share no connection. The man, seated to right, casts a sideward glance at something outside the picture. He is disinterested in the woman beside him. His hair and beard are disheveled and he holds a pipe in his teeth. His clothes show that he is a member of the working class. His drink sits on the table by his right arm. It is believed to be a “mazagram,” cold, black coffee with seltzer water. The drink was a popular remedy for hangover. The female figure is the centerpiece of the painting. She sits at
the table; shoulders slumped, arms hanging at her sides. Her downcast eyes have a faraway look, which gives her expression a sense of fatigue and dejection. A full glass of absinthe sits on the table in front of her, although she seems to have lost interest in drinking. The pale light of early morning fills the space. The earliness of the hour suggests that they have been drinking in the café all night. There is an overall sense of weariness in the painting. The increasing alcoholic consumption among working class café was augmented by the popularization of absinthe drinking. By the end of the nineteenth century, the consumption of absinthe was one of the most heated social issues of the time. However, as the artist flâneur, Degas does not choose sides in his painting. He remains the non-judgmental observer. He records a scene that was growing more and more common in the café, without expressing criticism on the vices of absinthe drinking.

More emotional is Vincent Van Gogh’s use of absinthe. His paintings offer a special view of how this drink affected the art world. The absinthe images by Degas, Raffaelli and Manet portray scenes from French life that were quite common by the end of the century. Yet, they are all detached observations, made by an artist-flâneur. They are depictions of something the artist observed but had no personal experience with. Although Manet and Degas were frequent visitors to Paris
cafés, neither is known to have drunk any absinthe. They enjoyed the intellectual exchange with other artists and the opportunity to observe life as it happened. It is here that Van Gogh’s images of absinthe can be given as contrasts to those of Manet and Degas. Van Gogh did have personal experience with absinthe, and this comes through in his works. To understand Van Gogh’s exact connection with absinthe, it is important to be familiar with the time he spent living in Paris with his brother Theo Van Gogh.

Vincent Van Gogh arrived in Paris in 1885 and immediately moved into his brother Theo’s apartment. The arrangement soon proved to be impractical, with stacks of canvases crowding the small space, the situation became intolerable. The brothers moved to a new, larger apartment at 54 rue Lepic. It was at this time that Van Gogh was introduced to artists such as Camille Pissarro, Paul Signac, Emile Bernard and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec and the Impressionistic style. Despite his initial excitement at being exposed to the new ideas and artists of the Paris art scene, the artist’s quarrelsome ways and the café atmosphere in general soon disillusioned him.
He spent time in the Paris cafés with Toulouse-Lautrec, who seemed to be drawn to Van Gogh, a man equally odd in appearance and demeanor as himself. It was in these cafés that Van Gogh was introduced to absinthe (Figure 16).

16. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, sketch of Vincent van Gogh, pastel, c. 1887

Toulouse-Lautrec was rather notorious for his absinthe drinking and always carried a hollow cane full of absinthe for emergencies. He even invented his own absinthe cocktail, the earthquake, which was absinthe diluted with cognac rather than water. Van Gogh surely began to feel the effects of his lifestyle. For someone who worked so hard to hold on to reality, the mind altered dream states brought on by excessive absinthe drinking must have taken its toll on Van Gogh’s psyche. Theo, aware of the deleterious effects the drink was known to have, was worried about his brother. In the
winter of 1887, Van Gogh became ill. He was feeling the increasing effects of syphilis, worsened by his absinthe drinking. To make matters worse, the Paris art circles, café life and the city, were increasingly irritating him. Mentally and physically, Paris was becoming more than Van Gogh could handle. In a letter to Theo, he alluded to his future intentions of getting away from Paris life.

“I will take myself off somewhere down south to get away from the sight of so many painters that disgust me as men.” It is clear that Van Gogh had had his fill of Paris. In the winter of 1888 he boarded a train and left for Arles. After arriving in Arles, Van Gogh again wrote about his condition on leaving the city:

“I was certainly going the right way for a stroke when I left Paris. I paid for it nicely afterwards! When I stopped drinking, when I stopped smoking so much, when I began again to think instead of trying not to think--Good Lord, the depression and the prostration of it!”
The first of Van Gogh’s absinthe images was done while he was still in Paris (Figure 17).


It is a still life of a glass of absinthe beside a water decanter. These two objects are the main focal point of the painting. There are no figures in the painting, save the street wanderers seen through the window. We see the corner of a chair, cropped by the edge of the painting. A single tree stands outside the window. This work shows the Impressionistic style that influenced Van Gogh while living in Paris. It does not have the intense, contrasting colors of his later works in Arles. Rather, it is done in the pastel tones characteristic of Impressionism. Yet, it is not a typical rendering of
“slice of life” scene from a café. The attention is focused on the absinthe. It is said of Van Gogh’s still life subjects that they all contain personal meaning for the artist. They are a form of self-portraiture.31 There is no attention given to café patrons, or the café interior. For Van Gogh, the absinthe was a symbol of the unhappiness and tension the artist was beginning to associate with the city of Paris.

Vincent Van Gogh’s second image of absinthe, and certainly his most famous, is his painting The Night Café (Figure 18). In a letter to his brother, Van Gogh described the café:

“In my picture the night café I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, run mad or commit a crime. I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green. The room is blood red and dark yellow with a green billiard table in the middle; there are four lemon yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most alien reds and greens in the figures of the little sleeping hooligans in the empty dreary room, in violet and blue. The white coat of the patron, on vigil in a corner turns lemon yellow or pale luminous green. So I have tried to express, as
it where, the powers of darkness in a low wine shop, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil’s furnace of pale sulphur all under the appearance of Japanese gaiety and the good nature of Tartarin."^32


In his painting, Van Gogh portrays the interior of a café, the one just around the corner from his little yellow house. The hanging lamps cast a dazzling artificial glow, bathing the café in a luminous sulphur wash of light. The floor, the billiard table and the bar are all a green tainted hue, the color of absinthe. He intensifies the café image with the use of red and green.
These are complementary colors that, placed side by side, serve to enhance each other. Van Gogh often used this technique to heighten to coloring in his painting. He believed that “exaggerated” color was a means to give a more convincing effect in his works. He wrote in a letter that he was, “using...color as a means of arriving at the expression and intensification of character.” The figures scattered around the room give the feeling of isolation and dejection. Only the proprietor stands looking out at the viewer, perhaps to invite him in. Empty absinthe bottles litter the tables. The scene is reminiscent of Van Gogh’s days in Paris and his frequent trips to the café. The dazzling, dizzying effects of the artificial lamps and the luminous green hue of the interior show that this image was done by a painter who was familiar with the feeling of absinthe intoxication.

Although their painting styles and use of color varied greatly, Van Gogh’s lonely “Night Café” patrons can be compared to those in the Absinthe paintings of Degas and Raffaelli. In all three works the figures give a sense of loneliness. They are weary absinthe drinkers, slumped over the café table, drowning their troubles. They do not connect with the others in their midst. They are lost in their own world.
I believe it is important to clarify, so as not to be misunderstood, that at this time, Van Gogh did not paint while under the influence of any substance. Painting was too important to him and he only worked with a lucid mind. Van Gogh had decided in advance that he wanted to portray the café. It is interesting that when he did begin to paint it he choose to express it as he did. For Van Gogh the café was a place where “one could go mad.”\textsuperscript{35}

A third painting done by Van Gogh regarding this subject was \textit{The Dance Hall} (Figure 19).

Although absinthe does not play as obvious a role as in *The Night Café*, the expression is the same. The painting shows a dance hall packed with people. In the foreground, the girls have their backs to the viewer. In the middle ground the figures have faces (one is even a portrait of Madame Roulin). In the background the figures become a faceless mass. Van Gogh incorporates his technique of using complementary colors. He uses contrasting violets and yellow in the foreground, blues and oranges in the middle ground and reds and greens in the background. This creates an overall effect of intensifying color, comparable to his *Night Café*. There is a dominating use of greens and yellows in the composition that mixes in with the use of complementary colors. This is also seen in *Night Café*. It calls to mind the common descriptions of the color of absinthe: luminous green and sulphur yellow. In the lower right corner, almost obscured, is a green table with absinthe glasses. Certain objects in the painting seem detached. Some heads do not seem to fit properly on any body. The artificial lights have no means of support. The back view of the women’s heads in the foreground seems reminiscent of the Breton women in Gauguin’s *Vision after the Sermon*. Gauguin often urged Van Gogh to paint from his imagination and although Van Gogh feared straying from reality, and rarely painted from memory, this may be
an attempt by Van Gogh to follow Gauguin’s advice and do a painting more from his imagination.\textsuperscript{38} This departure from reality may have had a connection to memories of the mind-altering states Van Gogh experienced while under the influence of absinthe. The dizzying atmosphere of *The Dance Hall* certainly brings to mind such feelings of over-intoxication.

There has been great interest in attempting to diagnose Van Gogh’s medical condition. In numerous letters he describes his various illnesses. While these descriptions give a personal account of his symptoms, they do not give exact medical diagnoses. In the years since his death, physicians have offered several theories including: epilepsy, syphilis, insomnia, sunstroke, as well as mental disorders such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Many theories claim that Van Gogh’s numerous medical problems explain, not only his behavior, but the way he painted.

The role that alcohol played in Van Gogh’s life has also been said to be an influence in his art. In his book, *Vincent Van Gogh: Chemicals Crisis and Creativity*, Wilfred N. Arnold Ph.D. addresses many of the theories about Van Gogh and the relationship of illness and alcohol abuse to his work. This includes claims that absinthe induced hallucinations influenced his expression of colors. His use of vivid color, yellows and greens especially, is the result of the mind-altering liquor.\textsuperscript{39}
Others maintain that Van Gogh’s perception of color was influenced by a temporary condition known as Xanthopsia, which altered his vision and emphasized yellow. Arnold comes to his own conclusion that in spite of numerous supposed conditions, the dominance of the yellow color palette is due to Van Gogh’s own artistic preference. This seems the most logical and probable explanation.

It is known that Van Gogh had a tendency toward absinthe drinking, there is no need to refute that point. The question is, what was its actual effect on Van Gogh’s life. It is certain that Van Gogh suffered from numerous ailments, exact diagnoses immaterial, and that symptoms were most certainly compounded by absinthe. The more intriguing argument is the influence that absinthe had in Van Gogh’s art. Much of Van Gogh’s artwork is dominated by personal symbols. He portrays objects and images that hold meaning for him. Portraits of his friends, the landscapes that meant so much to him, images of nature and even his little yellow house; these are the images that fill his canvases. Van Gogh put great forethought into choosing his subjects. Jan Biaslostocki, a Polish art historian, wrote of the importance of symbolism in Van Gogh’s work:

“However, in general, Van Gogh called a new symbolism into life, which was derived from a direct appreciation of tangible objects and of the contact, associations, and moods which
are therewith connected. A bird’s nest, a house, a chair, shoes, farmers working, ravens, the sun, and sunflowers—all these have become the means of attaining a symbolic art for Van Gogh. And beyond all this the restless and infirm psyche of the artist was displayed in a preference for certain motifs, for paintings which are informed by an original and elemental power and which symbolize either the healthy side of life, such as friendship, or else the dark and the evil, of night, even of madness and death.”

It is the “madness” that is expressed in certain works by Van Gogh. This is where the influence of absinthe takes shape. With the reputation it carried around the turn of the century, as well as his personal experiences with the liquor, for Van Gogh, absinthe became a symbol. In his works it becomes associated with unease, tension and torment; emotions Van Gogh must have associated with the drink and its influence on his life.

While Van Gogh’s absinthe images are few in number compared to his scenes of nature or his portraiture, they do give important insight to a part of the artist’s psyche that he was usually afraid to express. We can see the things that troubled the artist most: his fear of going mad and losing his ability to paint. Painting was a source of great comfort for Van Gogh and to lose this
would have been devastating. He knew his ever-worsening condition was a threat to this and it must have frightened him terribly. His absinthe images are an expression of this. With the artist’s fragile mental health, the potent liquor must have been one of the things that threatened his hold on reality. In spite of this he continued to drink while in Arles. It is said that he had been drinking absinthe with Gauguin just nights before the infamous ear mutilation.\textsuperscript{43} Oscar Wilde once wrote of absinthe:

"After the first glass you see things as you wish they were. After the second glass, you see things as they are not. Finally you see things as they really are, and that is the most horrible thing in the world."\textsuperscript{44}

Van Gogh must have known all too well what he meant.

Endnotes

2 Lanier, p. 25.
3 Lanier, p. 23.
5 Ibid.
8 Ibid. Conrad explains that "L’Academie d’Absinthe was a café formerly at 176 Rue Saint Jacques; absomphe was Rimbaud’s comic spelling of absinthe.
9 Conrad, p. 29.
10 Prestwich, Patricia E., Drink and the Politics of Social Reform (Palo Alto, California: The Society for the Promotion of Science and
Conrad sites several examples of the financial impact of the absinthe producing industry. Out of the 8,776 residents in Pontarlier, 500 worked for Pernod and the other distillers. Over 3,000 people in the Doubs Valley derived their livelihood from the cultivation and production of absinthe. The Pernod-Fils absinthe factory at Pontarlier in the Doubs Valley was a large source of employment in the region. Absinthe from factories like Pernod-Fils was shipped all around the world. Crates were stamped with destinations such as San Francisco, Saigon, Tahiti, Madagascar and New Orleans. Consumption of the drink continued to rise, from 700,000 liters of absinthe in 1874 to 36,000,000 liters in 1910. This meant increasing revenues for manufacturers; fifteen million francs per year. The government would benefit as well, with surtaxes on the substance generating over fifty million francs in the national treasury, one percent of the annual budget.

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contents into my face. I managed to duck and grab him, take him out of the café and across the Place Victor Hugo. A few minutes later, Van Gogh was in his own bed and in a matter of seconds had fallen asleep, not to awaken until morning. When he awoke he was perfectly calm and said to me: "My dear Gauguin, I have a dim recollection that I offended you last night."

"Conrad, p. 37."
Conclusion

At a time when artists were looking for a way to break from the Academy, the Paris café was already an established haven for alternative thinkers and the bohemian crowd. The earliest cafés were host to heated political discussions. The Latin Quarter was home to many members of the Bohemia made famous by author Henri Mürger. These were the penniless writers and struggling artists who rejected the establishment. The followers of Courbet met at the brasseries to debate the importance of their gritty, realistic subjects over the mythological and historical works of the Academy and the dramatic action of the Romanticist movement. This tradition continued with Manet and his followers, providing them with an atmosphere of progressive thinking and intellectual stimulation. This new generation of artists and writers found their retreat on the hill of Montmartre.

The formation of the Batignolles Group at the Café Guerbois proved to be an important event in the birth of the Impressionist movement. Manet emerged as a true leader in the new modern art. He and the artists that surrounded him represented the first real movement to break away from the Salon and exhibit their works independently. Even with
the apparent failure of their first exhibition in 1874, the show represented a huge step for any artist who hoped to achieve success without the approval of the Academy. Through their camaraderie at the Café Guerbois, and later at La Nouvelle Athènes, the group formed the basis of a movement that challenged all existing notions of art and the art market. Their contact with private dealers such as Durand-Ruel, was the basis for the artist-private dealer relationship that permanently changed the way art is exhibited and sold. For these artists the café replaced the Academy in every way. George Moore commented when asked “What is the “Nouvelle Athènes:”

“He who would know anything of my life must know something of the academy of the fine arts. Not the official stupidity you read of in the daily papers, but the real French academy, the café.”

The café played an invaluable role in the eventual success of the Impressionists and the creation of an art system independent of the Academy.

By the mid 1870’s the café had new meaning for the Impressionists. The artists who frequented the café turned their attention to their café surroundings. Until this time, they searched for subjects in other aspects of Parisian daily life. However, it could not be ignored that
the café was a vital part of Parisian culture. Through a steady increase in the popularity of the café, as well as a steady rise in alcoholic consumption among the working class, it became much more than just a drinking establishment. By the late nineteenth century, the café was a social institution. Parisian citizens could be seen there at all times of the day. They took their meals there, socialized and drank, often preferring a seat at a café table to their own homes. To the sharp eye of the artist-flâneur, the café was the stage of modern life. It became a symbol of Paris. The works of Manet and Degas expressed the dynamic of the café atmosphere and established it as an integral part of Parisian society. Another symbol arose in the world of the café: absinthe.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the social phenomenon of absinthe drinking was inextricably tied to the café. As the popularity of the drink increased, so did the popularity of the café. The working class turned to absinthe as a means to drown the troubles of their everyday lives. The artists and writers who drank absinthe believed that the deleterious effect of the drug could free their minds. Both indulged at the café. For artists like Manet and Degas who were interested in capturing scenes of everyday life, absinthe was a fundamental part the café scene. For
van Gogh, absinthe and the café were symbols of an ever-present uncertainty about his painting and his sanity. Although each artist portrayed it differently, the appearance of absinthe as a subject in modern art reaffirms its significance in late nineteenth century Parisian culture.

The Impressionist break from the Academy had a lasting effect on the art world. Although their styles came into question and were rejected by modern artists that followed, they opened the doors for a freedom of expression in painting that had long been stifled. They bore the brunt of rejection and ridicule by a public who conformed to the standards of painting they saw every year at the Salon. They opened their eyes to the theater of life around them, rejecting the tired, outdated subjects adhered to by the Academy. This allowed future artists the freedom to choose style and subject, without the fear of never having their works exhibited or sold.

In all this, the café was the Impressionists’ school and studio. Their images provide a lasting glimpse of the café culture that gave rise to the fathers of modern art.

Endnotes

1 Moore, p. 74.
Bibliography


VITA

Karen Dees was born in Houston, Texas. She remained there until her father retired and the family moved to Shreveport, Louisiana. She attended high school at Caddo Parish Magnet High School. It was here that she took her first art history course and developed a love for the study of art.

In the fall 1992, she began her studies at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. Although her original intent was to pursue a degree in science, she soon gravitated back to her interest in art history. In December 1997 she received her Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts, with a concentration in art history.

After a semester away from university, she decided to return to school to pursue a Master of Arts degree. She was accepted into the graduate program at Louisiana State University in the Fall of 1998. Here she was given the opportunity to travel to Europe as a teaching assistant. On her return, she completed her comprehensive exams and began her thesis research. Her analysis of café life in Paris is a reflection of her interest in examining the role of social and historical influences in the development of art.