The Eternal and the Transitory: Exoticism, Otherness, and Commodity in Giovanni Boldini's La Zingara

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The Eternal and the Transitory: Exoticism, Otherness, and Commodity

in Giovanni Boldini’s La Zingara

Brandon Esposto Johnson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Eternal and the Transitory: Exoticism, Otherness, and Commodity in Giovanni Boldini’s La Zingara

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Giovanni Boldini’s La Zingara is an image fraught with mystery. As a lesser-known artist, scholarship on him and this painting is sparse. This thesis details the innovations that Boldini exhibited as an artist working in nineteenth-century France, using the lenses of feminist and Marxist art historical readings for a new interpretation of this piece. Participating in the oppressive systems of capitalism, sexism, and prejudice, Giovanni Boldini created the image of La Zingara for personal gain. Painting a subject from a marginalized community, the Romani, Boldini benefitted from those systems. He “others” his Italian heritage and modern art developments to construct a portraiture totally unique to him and his oeuvre. While other artists worked on similar subjects at the time, Giovanni Boldini set himself apart through his updating of classic styles, drawing upon the Christian iconography of the Byzantine tradition, the portraiture of Trecento and the Renaissance, and some ancient Roman conventions. Additionally, the artist capitalizes on the growing interest and commodification of Japonisme to create a highly marketable work. Furthermore, this thesis explores issues of gender and class to acknowledge the difficult place that women have filled in the history of art. Finally, this thesis argues that Boldini deserves a greater place in the history of art.

Keywords: Giovanni Boldini, La Zingara, Romani, Travelling Peoples, Marxism, commodity, Christian iconography, profile portraiture, Japonisme, class, gender, space, nineteenth-century, France, Italy, macchia, Macchiaioli
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Introduction

The nineteenth century, one of the most popular and beloved eras of art history, is marked by its embrace of modernity. Artists and artisans depicted moments of real life as they showed subjects and scenes in the moment the artist was creating. Artists were shying away from classical motifs and opting for more modern portrayals of everyday life. Another aspect of this era and its art is the demand to be unique, with the artist takes on the role of “genius.” This desire of to be different and create things that have never been seen before has been applied in many ways in the arts, and in this particular era, individuality was key for capital and commodity. The more innovative an artist, the more likely their art would be sought after, purchased, and placed in the halls of the avant-garde collectors.

One such artist laboring for uniqueness was Giovanni Boldini (1842-1931), whose La Zingara (fig. 1) shows a white western European woman in the exoticized garb of the Romani. Boldini’s La Zingara features a dark-haired white woman in profile view, visible from the mid-torso up. The figure is depicted wearing a dark garment, accessorized with a patterned mantle made up of oranges and reds, and a blue scarf sits around her neck. Behind the figure a combination of various yellows, oranges, and gold create a non-narrative background. The

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1 The term ‘Romani’ has a tumultuous history but has been accepted as the official term for referring to the Travelling Peoples by the United Nations, US Library of Congress, and various Romani organizations. It is largely used to refer to the people as a whole, as well as the culture, but not all subgroups fully embrace the term. For the purposes of this analysis, Romani will be used. The traditional title of this painting, which translates as The Gypsy, has become somewhat problematic. The term itself is utilized as a racial slur and pejorative, often denoting negative stereotypes. The Pitti Palace’s online archive gives the painting an alternative title: “Portrait of a Woman” (http://catalogo.uffizi.it/it/29/ricerca/detailiccd/1180541/) while the actual plaque on the painting gives the above-mentioned title. “Portrait of a Woman” is rather generic, vague, and shows no distinction in the subject matter offered by the original title. The term “Traveller” or “Travelling Peoples” is utilized rather than Romani because while the term is acceptable to use, it is not accepted by all groups of people that it is used to denote. The term Romani also finds its root in Roma, which means “married Rom man”, and therefore could be argued against being used for a depiction of a woman pertaining to the same culture (Ian Hancock, We are the Romani People, [Hatfield: University of Herfordshire Press, 2005], XIX-XX.). Traveller seems to be the least problematic of the possible terms and could be used in place of the title given by the Pitti, but the purposes of simplicity and clarity, the name used in the analysis will be the given title, La Zingara, with the understanding that it is a term that is no longer acceptable.
figure, her accoutrement, and the background are all painted with short, painterly brushstrokes. Though the date of this painting is unknown, it is very likely that it was painted between the years of 1870-1890, a period when the artist was living in Paris and when the modernist movements like Realism and Impressionism were at their height—eras that prominently feature exoticized art. Exoticism is a fascination with the “other,” with a time gone by, or with a group that finds itself on the fringes of society. It has been a major part of the European art world, influencing the design and styles of artists and artisans. The fascination with a culture other than one’s own—but more specifically one permeated with an air of the unknown—is the type of exoticism that found popularity in the nineteenth century. There is a romantic quality to showing the unknowable, and something that many artists capitalized on in their work.

To understand this artwork more fully, the lenses of feminist and Marxist theories will be applied throughout this thesis. The commodification of women was evident in the art scene of the nineteenth century, as renowned French poet, and art critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) noted in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863). Speaking to the popularity of images of courtesans and other fallen women, Baudelaire wrote, “in truth, they exist very much more for the pleasure of the observer than for their own.”2 The image of women sells, not for their benefit, but for the satisfaction of the male gaze. Pleasing one’s clientele was essential as an artist, and many working artists of the time were aiming to encapsulate all that it meant to be the painter of modern life. Giovanni Boldini accomplished the objectives of this type of painter through the commodification of women for his own gain as an artist, appealing to the heterosexual, white, western male gaze. In the time of the flourishing of capitalism, Boldini painted La Zingara, a portrait of an exotic woman, to sell her as a commodity.

Boldini capitalizes on established systems of oppression that subjugate women and minorities; with *La Zingara* appertaining to both groups. Boldini goes further and intentionally exoticizes art styles important to his Italian heritage, thereby taking advantage of his own “othered” state as a foreigner in France. By updating styles that were no longer in vogue, Boldini created an innovative type of portraiture, profiting on the exploitation of women and a minority group, the Romani, which he treats as a social type rather than as individuals. This thesis will argue that Giovanni Boldini others his Italian heritage to exoticize his subject and create a new religion of commodity and otherness, thus increasing his own personal and artistic capital. These actions granted Boldini a place among the avant-garde artists of the latter part of the nineteenth century and helped to satisfy his monetary aims.

**Giovanni Boldini, the Macchiaioli, and the Macchia**

Giovanni Boldini was a nineteenth-century Italian artist who found success as a portraitist in Paris. However, the artist began his career in Ferrara, Italy—where he was born—and continued his training in Florence in 1862, where he began to associate with a group of realist painters known as the Macchiaioli. It was in Florence, likely at the scene of the Caffè Michelangiolo, where Boldini was adopted into the group. Being the son of an artist who was trained by a group of fellow Italians and grew up in Italy, Boldini would have familiarized with the heritage of Italian art. However, the Macchiaioli movement in many ways reflects that of the French Impressionists, a group of artists intent on breaking away from the fascinations of Romanticism and embracing more modern modes of depiction. Similar styles in brush technique, subject matter, and painting *en plein air* were attributed to the Macchiaioli movement as well as

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to the French Impressionists; often, the Macchiaioli are referred to as the Italian Impressionists.\textsuperscript{4}

Guy Coegeval, the president of the Musée de l’Orangerie and the Musée D’Orsay from 2008-2017, wrote the following for a catalogue of a Macchiaioli show:

Même si l'on a souligné les affinités entre les macchiaioli et les impressionnistes, et si ce point a été débattu par la critique, on notera qu'il s'agit surtout d'un même rapport à la nature, et d'une même prise de distance par rapport à la tradition picturale. Néanmoins les macchiaioli n'oublient pas la leçon des maîtres du quattrocento, dont leurs oeuvres conservent le souvenir - en témoignent la transparence des tons, l'organisation de l'espace, et leur vision synthétique-, mais l'observation directe de la nature, les effets de forts contrastes, le travail de la matière constituent le vocabulaire et la syntaxe de cette peinture nouvelle.\textsuperscript{5}

The focus on the here and now, key elements of Realism and later Impressionism, is what unites these avant-garde groups from Italy and France. This Italian renegade group of artists broke from the norms of established academic painters and rejected their practices, much like the Impressionists had done.

The style of the Macchiaioli can be encapsulated in the \textit{macchia}, a stylistic element that was central to Boldini’s work and critical to his artistic success in Paris. This technique is a particularly loose brush stroke which received its name from the same word in Italian, which means “mark.” It is used colloquially in a negative sense of spot, blemish, or stain. This appears in Boldini’s work as a loose, painterly swipe of the brush, indicating the direction in which he painted, providing an active quality to his portfolio. This style, first learned in Florence under the tutelage of Macchiaioli artists, is manifest in his portraiture, something that gave his portfolio a unique edge in the competition for commissions by the rich and affluent. In around 1872 Boldini


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 9. “Even if we have underlined the affinities between the Macchiaioli and the Impressionists, and if this point has been debated by the critics, we will note that it is above all a question of the same relationship to nature, and the same distancing from the pictorial tradition. Nevertheless, the Macchiaioli do not forget the lesson of the masters of the quattrocento, of which their works preserve the memory - the transparency of tones, the organization of space, and their synthetic vision testify, but the direct observation of nature, the effects of strong contrasts, the work of the material constitute the vocabulary and the syntax of this new painting.” Translated by the author.
moved to Paris where he became well known for his portraits, living and working for most of his career there. He began to associate with Edgar Degas and the Impressionist movement, gaining access to this circle of innovative artists. His work in portraiture garnered him fame and led to his appointment as the commissioner of the Italian section of the Paris Exposition of 1889. For this he received the Légion d’honneur, an award established by Napoleon as the highest form of recognition for military and civil affairs. With his distinctive style and interest in depicting lavish fashions, Boldini was heavily sought after as a portraitist. His time spent with the Macchiaioli informs this work, and the style he cultivated became something that made him comparatively unique among working portraitists of the period. More interestingly, his idiosyncratic style became something that could be used to formally “other” his subjects, contributing to the trends of Orientalism and otherness that prevail in nineteenth-century art, especially in representations of women.

Rather than relying solely on context to create a portrait of otherness, Boldini also used his signature style as a tool of exoticization in his La Zingara. Boldini’s macchia, and especially the detail left out of the identity of the woman, serves to exoticize, providing the viewer with a romanticized Romani woman who, based solely on the phenotypical attributes of the sitter, appears to them as a contemporary French or Italian woman. Additionally, her status as a/the model implies that she is bourgeois or bourgeois adjacent, raising a class issue in this depiction. Boldini exoticizes a white western upper-class woman by placing her in the garb of the Romani and in titling this work with the designation of a lower-class individual. In La Zingara, he is creating a spectacle out of his subject, contextualizing a white western woman with the costume

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and name of another culture, and thus subjecting her to the stereotypes and its attendant subjugation.

Through his art, Giovanni Boldini commodifies an Italian model who is already othered by virtue of her gender. The sitter for this piece bears a resemblance to Alaide Banti, a favored model of the artist’s and daughter of fellow Macchiaioli artist Cristiano Banti. Unfortunately, there is no concrete indication as to the identity of this model. When compared to the other portraits done by Boldini, however, the model shows a likeness to the women named in those pieces (see figures 2-4). The dark hair, dark eyes, bourgeois attitude, white aristocratic countenances, and general impression in these four paintings lead one to conclude if they are depicting the same woman. It seems likely that the sitter for La Zingara was Alaide Banti, a woman who is inherently othered because of her gender and who is of Italian origin and heritage. Boldini’s choice to exoticize this woman was intentional, and likely done to increase his capital, either figurative or literal, as well as to distinguish himself within the avant-garde scene. While this othering is not unique to Boldini and his portfolio, his choice to make exotic a subject that he could tie back to his Italian heritage makes this piece something different to others in the avant-garde. In the case of La Zingara, the figure is othered both by her gender and her identity as a Romani for Boldini’s capitalistic gains.

Boldini created art to gain materially, rather than some poetic raison d’être that many assume motivates artists. It is a viable possibility for Boldini to have been inspired by the muses of creation and beauty like any other artist. However, his wife detailed the distaste Boldini held for poverty. She noted that his dream was to gain enough wealth in order to return to Italy and work for pleasure, rather than “lottare con la turba dei poveri artisti affamati.”8 He was not a fan

8 Emilia Cardona Boldini, Boldini nel suo tempo, Italy, 1951, 71. “[T]o fight with the troubles of the hungry artists.” Translated by the author.
of the methods and means by which artists, even the great ones, had to procure bread for
themselves, and thus wanted to gain enough capital and clout to keep himself from having to play the fool: “a lui non riusciva fare il pittore ed il giullare.”

Boldini’s goal was to paint the brightest and the most beautiful stars, to be a portraitist of the bourgeoisie and above. As his wife wrote, “voleva essere ritratista, avere per modelli le donne più belle ed eleganti del mondo, gli uomini più interessanti.” The question then arises: why choose a topic without an identity and of a marginalized social class who was stereotyped out of the ideals of white western beauty and elegance? The Romani were resistant to being included in the wage-labor market and capitalism in general with their reliance on family. In creating this extremely religious image of a Travelling Woman, Boldini turns her and her heritage into a commodity and brings them into the oppressive structures of capitalism.

Nineteenth-Century Cultural Interest in Travelling Peoples

Although the Travelling Peoples were all over nineteenth-century Europe, much of the research on Romani culture has been done in the context of Great Britain. While not much research has been done about Romani identity in nineteenth-century Italy, the very same Boldini would have grown up in, similarities can be extrapolated from British scholars, as these findings and generalizations were likely broadened to the European Travelling Peoples as a whole. The Romani did exist throughout all of Europe, and likely had differing receptions from culture to culture, but what remains consistent throughout is the otherness faced by the Travelling Peoples.

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9 Ibid. “[H]e was not able to be the painter and the jester.” Translated by the author.
10 Ibid, 73: “[H]e wanted to be a portraitist, to have the most beautiful and elegant women in the world and the most interesting men as models.” Translated by the author.
12 Ibid, 1-10.
The historical work established by said experts involved empirical studies of the Romani in their everyday lives. British “Gipsiologists” of the nineteenth century were disappointed in their local Travelling Peoples’ mode of dress, as it was not nearly exotic enough. In fact, the local Romani usually dressed similarly to the lower classes of society. Many nineteenth-century Gipsiologists became fascinated with Hungarian Romani, who dressed in the traditional attire of their homeland with all its colors and drapery. This appeared very unfamiliar to the Western European gaze. The travelogues that discussed the Romani were very popular in contemporary British and French society, and it is highly likely that Boldini would have been familiar with these narratives. The discussions of the Romani people were published, but never through or with the help of the Travelling Peoples, but rather in their stead. Costuming was easy to talk about, as it was something that could be personally observed, or exaggerated about just enough by the leading Romani “specialists” of the day. This exaggeration accomplished the purposes of exoticizing the Romani, both literarily and artistically.

This fascination with depicting the Travelling Peoples (or Travellers) finds its base in the growing interest in Spain by part of French artists and writers during the 1860s. Whether capitalistically motivated or not, artists of all kinds were bringing Romani identity into their portfolios. The Romani histories are largely based around a non-literary tradition and thus, in the nineteenth century, are told through the eyes of contemporary white westerners—hence the reliance on art, literature, and myth. Albeit biased, artists and authors reflected what these views and stereotypes of the Romani, who were largely othered in their works. Significantly, this

14 Ibid, 466-68.
exoticization was done in terms of Western Europe, as “the ‘real’ gypsy [was seen] as Spanish.”

This cultural interest in the exotic that exists in Europe began with Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* (1830) a book in which Spain is posited in terms of romanticism and otherness, creating a contrast in cultures between that of Spain and the “high style soon to be dubbed the Classics” in France. Writers and poets alike were creating stories of otherness, some of which featured the Romani. Charles Baudelaire, renowned poet, essayist, and art critique of the nineteenth century, wrote a poem titled *Bohémien en voyage* taking inspiration from a 1621 Jacques Callot print of the same name (fig. 5). Both of these works of art, poem and print, depict the Romani mid-travel with an emphasis on a nomadic lifestyle. Baudelaire pushes the fantastical elements of exoticism, as he refers to the Romani as prophets and worshippers of a nature goddess. These trends of rendering the Romani as exotic are found in text by literary greats such as Hugo and Baudelaire and eventually would make their way to the theater. The theater was a font of inspiration for creators of all kinds, and specifically it was an important space for Boldini. This space is key for the cultural understanding of *La Zingara*.

**The Spectacle of Carmen**

Giovanni Boldini was extremely inspired by the theater and more importantly influenced by the women who worked to make the theater and the connected dramatic spectacle a reality. His time spent enjoying the live performances and spectacles of the time surely informed his

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16 Ibid, 7.
19 Ibid, 33.
stylistic otherness. The theater was essential for the semination of exoticism as “[in] the theater, the barriers between Occident and Orient had to be breached to allow the audience to sympathize… at the same time that they had to be maintained to heighten dramatic tensions.”

In a biography of Boldini written by his wife, Emilia, she detailed Boldini’s love for the theater, writing: “Quasi ogni sera, andavano a teatro; Boldini amava il teatro e le attrici che, in fondo, sono le modelle più vere poiché mettono in posa non solo il loro corpo ma anche il loro spirito, proprio come il pittore avrebbe volute che facessero.” His time spent at the theater, among his muses of choice informs his overall oeuvre, artistic method, and his capitalistic goals. All this time spent at the theater likely led Boldini to see all the popular shows of the era, and use them as inspiration in his own art.

It is more than likely that Boldini was able to see Georges Bizet’s Carmen, as it was a great dramatic spectacle of the time that displayed the burgeoning artistic senses of otherness and exoticism. Otherness, while clearly established as being present in nineteenth-century Europe, finds itself in more than just the academic art world, but also the world of performance and entertainment. Carmen (1875), an opera and spectacle by Georges Bizet, is based on an 1845 novella of the same name by Prosper Mérimée. In the novella, the protagonist finds himself in a Romani encampment in Spain and encounters the bewitching Carmen. Problematically, Mérimée notes that Carmen is too beautiful to be of the Romani, as her beauty exceeds that of any other Romani woman the author has ever seen. This serves as the first instance in which the artist attempts to take this ‘othered’ woman and bring her into the in-group of Europeans. Later, the

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21 Emilia Cardona Boldini, Boldini nel suo tempo, Italy, 1951, 70 [“Almost every evening, they he went to the theatre; Boldini loved the theatre and the actresses that are the truer models because they pose not only their body but also their spirit, exactly as the painter would have wanted them to.”] Translated by the author.
author finds a man who is to be garroted and listens to his story of Carmen. The man tells the narrator of the story of his tumultuous relationship with Carmen, fraught with crime and references to the occult. This relationship thrives on the ideas of exoticism, as the protagonist is a man of Basque descent and she of the Romani. While in the act of running away, Carmen tells her lover that she will not live with him, as she mystically knows she is to die by his hand, which she does after a fit of passion via her rejection of him. He buries her, and Christianizes her by burying her with a crucifix—something the character admits his hesitancy in doing, another act of trying to ‘un-other’ Carmen. In the final act, Mérimée contributes what he believes is useful in understanding the Romani by providing descriptions of physical characteristics, language, dress, tradition, etc. He mentions that he believes—probably along with the majority of those consuming his work and other exoticized artworks of the Romani—that the Romani do not have a religion of their own and fear no god except the god of the land they currently live in. Bizet, in his adaption of Mérimée’s novel, weaves a story that is orientalist and exotic in nature but attempts to undermine otherness by introducing the normalcies accustomed to Europeans, like God-fearing Christianity in opposition to the occultic otherness of the Romani.

The precedents established by nineteenth-century French art and literature devoted to the Romani would influence the ways in which Boldini’s La Zingara was received. To be sure, the stereotypes perpetuated by these representations are problematic at a minimum. Many of these stereotypes exist today—they are thieves, fortunetellers, hustlers, godless, and so on. This kind of social typing certainly contributed to the reception of Boldini’s La Zingara. Bizet’s opera changes little of Mérimée’s novella, with Carmen still dying in the end at the hand of a lover.

23 Ibid, 84.
24 Ibid, 88.
25 Mérimée, Carmen, 85-93.
The darkly romantic narrative is no stranger to modern audiences but was rather difficult for contemporary French audiences. It would have been easy for viewers to see this work and assume that Boldini’s painting was related to Bizet’s Carmen figure, as the opera itself was rather popular due to Bizet’s unexpected death in 1875.\(^{26}\) This obsession with exoticized Spain and the interest in the Romani led influential creators of the time to travel there, including Manet, Degas, and Boldini himself in the fall of 1889.\(^{27}\) Earlier influential artists like Eugène Delacroix also traveled to Spain. Many artists and creators dedicated their practice to showcasing the Travelling Peoples in their art, influenced by other artists or their journeys to “exotic” Europe.

**Nineteenth-Century Artist Depictions of Travelling Peoples**

Nineteenth-century artists such as Gustave Doré, Camille Corot, and Edouard Manet, all of whom came to the art scene before Boldini, painted figures of Travelling Women, with most of them following the same kinds of representational strategies. In his study *Gypsy-Travelers of Nineteenth-Century Society*, David Mayall declares: “A ‘classic’ portrait of the Romani Gypsy is dark-haired, black-eyed, dark-complexioned and wearing a headscarf and large ornamental earrings.”\(^{28}\) These traits are equally applicable to Mediterranean women, further connecting southern Europeans with the Romani through conventions of otherness. Mayall continues: “Building from a base of racial separateness the various commentators constructed a not entirely unsympathetic vision of the proud Roman: a tousle-haired, black-eyed, brightly-dressed people.

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of Oriental and Travelling ancestry.” These stereotypes and more inform the painters of the
nineteenth century in their pursuit to depict the “exotic” Travelling Peoples.

Interestingly, Boldini’s colleague, the French realist painter Gustave Doré, painted A
Gypsy Dancing the Zorongo, date unknown (fig. 6). In this painting Romani women are depicted
in dance. This type of dance, a variation of flamenco, is uniquely Spanish, further connecting the
‘classic’ image of the Romani woman as an exoticization of Southern European culture. The
younger of the two women in this work fits all the previously mentioned requirements of dark
complexion and elaborate earrings. The skirt of this woman is tattered and torn, alluding to the
poverty experienced by the Romani, and perhaps as another method of otherizing this woman
and separating her from the bourgeois cast of French society.

Fellow French Realist Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot also painted his versions of a
Traveller Woman, both titled La Zingara (1865, 1865-70) (figures 7 and 8 respectively). The
first figure seems to be decidedly southern European, with generally darker features while
retaining light skin. She carries a stringed instrument, likely a lute, alluding to the stereotypes of
Travelling Peoples and performance. Perhaps Corot is making a spectacle of the woman by
insinuating that she would provide a public performance, or perhaps a more ritualistic and
nature-based performance. The background is smoky and intimates at the changes that will be
seen in the transition from Realism to Impressionism. The reality of the moment being
represented is a storm of sorts, or possibly this could be a simple be excision of narrative. The
second figure is much more ambiguous. She looks to be a mix of a Muse, Maenad, and a
contemporary European woman. The clothing is an ensemble of a white tunic and pink skirt, and
like the first figure she has a garland of flowers in her hair. The second figure’s features are more

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29 Ibid, 78.
feminine and softer compared to the first’s much squatter and wearied face, not fitting in with the
typical portrayals of the Travelling Women.

The most important avant-garde artist in France, Edouard Manet, demonstrated a keen
interest in the Romani. Early in Manet’s career, he made an etching called *The Gypsies* (1862)
(fig. 9), which he later destroyed in 1867. It survives today in fragments, photos, etchings, and
has been described as a very “Spanish” work.30 The work features a family of Travellers, with a
commanding male figure standing at the forefront of the composition in front of a mother, baby,
and young boy drinking from a vessel. The piece was likely based off a painting by seventeenth-
century artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo and was used in Manet’s study of Spanish culture and
painting.31 It has been theorized that it was because of the unbalanced composition and
competing types (i.e., holy family versus peasants) that Manet destroyed this work.32 This
establishes precedents in art for the depiction of Romani women.

One of the most recognizable nineteenth-century Romani women is the figure of Carmen,
both from the novella and the opera. Manet’s *Carmen* (1880) (fig. 10), is a painting depicting the
titular character of Bizet’s popular opera. This is a decidedly different depiction of a Romani
woman, as it is a fictional woman belonging to a spectacle of performance art. Carmen, perhaps
the most well-known Romani woman because of her popularization on the stage, is shown here
in the garb of a Spanish woman—an explicit connection to the opera. She is shown with the dark
complexion, eyes, and hair typical of Romani depictions. The title provides important context
and facilitates clear reading of the piece. She is in a powerful stance and holds a determinative

Painting*, eds. Gary Tinterow and Geneviève Lacambre (New York: The
Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), 213.
31 Ibid, 214.
32 Ibid.
stare, showcasing the very character of Carmen. Her costume contributes to the conventional type of the Romani, as it is ornately decorated in a typical Spanish style, further conflating the two cultures. Speaking to his interest in “Hispanicizing French subjects,” art historian Juliet Wilson-Bareau argues that “in such works, Manet was playing a double game: he was both pastiching the past and engaging it.” This piece and the others previously mentioned functioned as precedents for Boldini’s portrait.

La Zingara and Carmen as Icons

The story of Carmen, dealing with the connections of Christianity and Travelling Peoples can be made clear through Boldini’s La Zingara. When Carmen first confronts the unnamed narrator of the story, he tells her that she looks as if she comes from Paradise. He repudiates her connection to the Roma, noting that the Europeans around her refuse her and her people any place in the Christian understanding of Paradise. This characterization of Carmen as a paradisical figure in the literary and performative representation of this Romani woman are amplified in Boldini’s La Zingara, where he presents her as a kind of Christian icon. This depiction is clearly following in the tradition of portraying saints and holy women. Early Christian and Byzantine panel paintings were meant to be otherworldly in nature, as they depicted sacred scenes and figures. These icons were usually created on wood panel or canvas and functioned as cult or miraculous images. Because of this belief “the painter of icons tended to be less concerned with reality or nature than was the wall painter or mosaicist. Perspective and anatomy were often less regarded, coloring tended to be symbolic rather than realistic; the aim was to carry the spectator away from the affairs of this world,” argues David Rice in his work

33 Ibid, 224.  
34 Mérimée, Carmen, 31.
detailing Byzantine art. Icons typically feature a golden background that evoked the otherworldly sense of heaven that would transport a viewer to a religious contemplation of the image. The figures tend towards the abstract over the realistic, again reinforcing the supernatural intentions of the image. The ultimate goal of the Byzantine icon, and the viewer of it, is to allow for contemplation and closeness to God. By drawing on a historically Italian style, Boldini christianizes *La Zingara*, thereby alluding to the Christianization of Carmen, in order to create a new kind of icon.

In creating a new type of icon, Boldini relies on formal elements to evoke the sacredness and otherworldly qualities held by such images. The impasto is thick, and mainly used only as an application of color, rather than as a detailing of scenery. This formal treatment excises *La Zingara* from any possible narrative, much like the icons of the Early Christian or Byzantine styles, a tradition that would have been familiar to the Italian-born, Florence-trained Boldini. The boldest use of color, and the most distinct shape in the piece is the scarf, a vibrant blue reminiscent of the ultramarine made popular by Christian art and iconography, further connecting this piece to the idea of a Christian icon. The use of a gold background, devoid of any narrative is as intentional as the painterly brushstrokes; aesthetically Boldini is connecting himself to larger art movements of well Christian and Italian origin.

*La Zingara* is christianized through her association to this established and well-known artistic form and is taken out of any context that might incriminate her and associate her with the occult rather than the cult of Christianity. More than just an act of Christianization, Carmen was buried with a cross crucifix and the spurned lover begs a hermit to pray for her, then ends his tale, placing the blame on the Romani people for making Carmen a Traveller rather than

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allowing her to be accountable for her actions. Boldini similarly christianizes his subject by disconnecting her from the narrative in the religious tradition, giving her a paradisical background, and taking away any specific identity. By rooting this exoticized woman in the reality of the traditions of his Italian heritage, Boldini is trying to effect a similar transformation to what Mérimée had attempted with Carmen. Boldini does not save or redeem this woman from her inherent otherness or to bring her into mainstream European culture. Rather, he acknowledges that innate otherness is a part of her; it is her title, it is her birthright, and it is who she is. Thus, an attempt to liberate her from identity, individuality is cancelled out by simply giving her the title that he does and therefore weighs her down with the burden of otherization, both contextually and formally.

**Portraiture of La Zingara**

Another factor contributing to the obstruction of the woman’s identity in *La Zingara* is the figure’s positioning in profile. Portraiture in profile finds roots in various periods throughout the history of art, but notably is featured in Roman coins and Renaissance portraiture. In ancient Rome, the profile of the emperor was immediately recognizable due to coins with inscriptions as well as propagandistic campaigns. In fact, Roman coins are essential to our current understanding of Roman emperors, as they are the only named portraits of Roman leaders. In Roman and Renaissance times, there was an art genre known as the cameo, or a portrait done via the intaglio process. These portraits were depicted in profile view like the classical Roman coins but lacked inscriptions. The portraits are usually scratched on gems, and the figure contrasts with a differently colored background. Coins and cameos evoke wealth and luxury, often

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manufactured in gold, connecting to this oddly profiled figure in Boldini’s work. It is no secret that profile portraiture fell out of vogue with the bourgeoisie, as the style and strains of being avant-garde necessitated a different kind of depiction.

There exists an interesting connecting factor between cameos and La Zingara: the production of incrustation in Bohemia. In modern culture, Bohemian and Romani culture are conflated to mean something different than the norm, close to nature and living off the land, carrying a certain stereotype with it. Cameo incrustation became an increasingly popular form of art and commodity in the mid-1800s, originating in Bohemia in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The cameos that made their way through bourgeois culture became a bohemian style ornament in their own way. The Roman cameo was an art genre meant to be a commodity rather than to be displayed in a museum and it was something that gained traction during the bourgeois boom of commodification and consumerism. In adapting the style of the cameo, Boldini further connects his art to commodity culture.

Not only did Giovanni Boldini adapt portrait styles from classical Rome in La Zingara; he also looked to another type of profile portraiture known for its role in the demonstration of wealth: Renaissance portraiture. Boldini could be drawing from the tradition of Trecento portraiture, which are typically done with gold backgrounds that are traceable to a Byzantine influence. These Renaissance portraits were easily accessible to Boldini, who spent his formative years in Florence. A common subject of these portraits were wome, who were often treated as mannequins for their fathers’ or husbands’ wealth, a means to showcase the fineries owned by their families. They were shown in the most fashionable of garb, as well as in adherence to all the contemporary beauty. It is often clear who these women were because of patronage records

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or titles given by the artist or family. They have no power of their own right or vaunting their own wealth—they are subject to the male gaze. Patricia Simons, an art historian and specialist of Renaissance art, posited in her article detailing female Renaissance portraiture: “The gaze, then a metaphor for worldliness and virility made of Renaissance woman an object of public discourse, exposed to scrutiny and framed by the parameters of propriety, display and ‘impression management.’ Put simply, why else paint a woman except as an object of display within male discourse?”39 She is not a mannequin for wealth nor of beauty, as her face is marred by the artist’s hand; she is not the typical subject for the male gaze. The only thing of worth in the painting may be her mantle and scarf, though it is difficult to place those with limited resources detailing Romani fashion of the nineteenth century. However, this stylistic choice to obscure the face of the figure is done clearly through the application of stylized formal elements.

Placing the subject of *La Zingara* on a golden background, which evokes Rome and other art periods, connects Giovanni Boldini to his ancestral classicism; it also makes him unique from other artists in late nineteenth-century France. Positioning *La Zingara* in the contexts of great art movements of the past creates a class disparity, as this woman would not have been the subject of art before the epoch of modernity. By using an othered subject and adding it into the greater context of Italian art heritage, Boldini is capitalizing off his unique Italian heritage, and creating a new religion of commodity. This commodification and connection to various past times and cultures cater to the ideals of exoticism. These choices, in conjunction with the title, “other” the woman in a way that could only be conceived by the ideals of Romanticism. Oddly, Impressionism is sometimes cited as a rejection of Romanticism.40 By joining or blending

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aesthetic traditions Boldini is creating a unique style all his own, at the price of the exoticization, commodification, and otherization of a woman.

**Influence of Japonisme**

Another artistic movement by which Boldini draws inspiration is the prevalent *japonisme* of the nineteenth century. There was a deluge of Japanese art into France and Europe at large during this time, as Japan opened up for wide-scale European trade. Artists were exposed to Edo period art, which favored depictions of women. The practice of depicting fashionable women on the boulevard, a favored subject of the Impressionists, takes influence from the Japanese convention of *Okiyo-e*, meaning “picture of the floating world.” These prints display an art style that is exceptionally flat, with oblique perspectives, and gold otherworldly backgrounds. These Japanese prints exported to Europe showed women in the public sphere, donning fashionable kimonos and other modes of dress. All types of women, from prostitutes to housewives, were topics for Japanese woodblock prints—art objects that were widely collected and commodified. These collections of Japanese and other Asian art would be held on the upper domestic levels of the home, available in spaces where the bourgeois women could enjoy them. There is an intrinsic connection between *japonisme* and women overall that Boldini evokes with *La Zingara*.

Giovanni Boldini, following the trends and precedents of nineteenth-century art, found inspiration from Japanese woodblock prints. He would have had access to this art, as his

43 Ibid, 112.
colleagues did. The conventions of a flat figure, fanciful dress, gold background, and a marginalized woman all find commonality with this cultural trend. Taking inspiration from this newly available art style, Boldini exoticizes his own artistic Italian heritage, reinventing it for the modern consumer, and increasing the worth of this piece and his own capital as an artist. In *La Zingara* the artist is depicting a nameless woman, styling her in exoticized clothing, and removing her from a narrative-driven space, clearly drawing inspiration from tide of Japanese arts contemporarily available to him. This makes *La Zingara* a rather anachronistic and unique commodity of his *oeuvre*.

**The Eternal and the Transient**

*La Zingara*’s otherization coheres with her new role as an icon and religious figure. Through this explicit religious influence in the piece, both contextual and formal, Boldini creates a religion of commodity and otherness, using his aesthetic language as a foil to the written language of poets and writers of the time. Charles Baudelaire, the aforementioned poet, wrote a treatise titled “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), which speaks to the reification of commodity in the contemporary world. This essay largely deals with what makes the modern painter truly modern, and how to define that term that so often is made confusing. Baudelaire speaks of the transient nature of modernity. It is the fugue and fragility of the present moment, and the artist who can truly capture it, that makes modernity what it is. This treatise could have been seen as a sort of guide for aspiring artists during the rise of modernity and non-academic art styles. While the treatise references a specific male artist, and exhibits benevolent sexism at best, it could be

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44 Ibid, 57–82.
conceived as a sort of aspiring set of behaviors and attributes that can lead an artist to greatness, or true beauty.45

The treatise itself largely focuses on the eternal concept of beauty and how a certain artist captures that. A significant portion of Baudelaire’s essay speaks specifically to the concept of women in art.46 As would be expected, Baudelaire places women on a pedestal, defining them as an artistic fount of inspiration, like deity and writes: “[f]or whom, but above all through whom, artists and poets create their most exquisite jewels . . . she is a divinity, a star . . . she is a kind of idol.”47 Baudelaire’s usage of religious language is prevalent throughout his essay, but there is a special kind of treatment that women receive in this regard, that being as the idea of idol.

Baudelaire treats women in a highly religious context, giving them equal influence in the realm of inspiration and creation as he does God and nature. Rather he is kinder in his treatment of women than he is of nature, as he demonstrates in his discussion of maquillage (makeup).48 Women in connection with fashion serve to remediate nature from the horror that it has become.49 Baudelaire argues that all things natural and evil come from nature, and it is through higher thinking and human engagement that virtue exists. Regardless, women are given a sort of salvific role in Baudelaire’s essay, albeit a passive one. The idol of woman herself is not actively creating or inspiring, but rather her figure is used as a pedestal on which the fashions of modernity are placed, a body by which to create art. The only thing that woman does actively, according to Baudelaire, is to adorn and decorate herself to be worshipped.50 These

45 Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays, 1-5.
46 The language used by Baudelaire is troubling in a modern-day context. While it does not advocate or utilize hostile sexism, the essay is very male-centric, going as far as to speak of women as more of a concept, tool for artists, and even so far as an unknowable deity rather than an equal to man.
47 Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays, 30.
48 Ibid, 31-34.
49 Ibid, 33.
50 Ibid, 33.
contemporary adornments of fashion, makeup, etc. become parts of the body of the idol. This all attests to the importance of materiality, both in Baudelaire’s essay as well in the contexts of modernity.

The goals of modernity, as previously stated, are to capture the transitory moment in paint and poetry. *La Zingara* fits this category well, but its subject cannot be satisfied wholly by a fleeting moment. Her inherent religiosity connects her to the concepts of eternity spoken of by Baudelaire. Speaking of the painter of modern life, Baudelaire writes, “he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains.” Later in the essay, he suggests that it is indeed a part of the artist’s job to “distill the eternal from the transitory.” *La Zingara* as a religious figure in Boldini’s new religion of commodity has a quality of eternity in her transience.

The formal qualities of the work indicate that the moment the viewer sees is fleeting, or at least the appearance thereof. However, this divine figuration is both momentary and a part of the eternal, similarly being the finite and the infinite. Indeed, the finite can be used to communicate a transcendent message that is divine in nature. The divine exists in the transient to the same capacity as it does in the eternal, at least according to this aesthetic language of Boldini. As this is a rather anachronistic depiction in the overall *oeuvre* of Boldini, *La Zingara* accomplishes the goals of distilling the transient from the Eternal, providing the viewer with a unique snapshot moment with a religious eternal feeling.

To speak in terms solely of momentary or eternal would rob this work of its very quintessence. Eternity exists in the moments that pass by, as well as in the very moment that this

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51 Ibid, 30.
52 Ibid, 5.
53 Ibid, 12.
work aims to depict. The work’s unique identity as a portrayal of an exoticized woman joined
with its function of creating a pseudo-religion serves to establish an eternal, or rather timeless,
aspect to the painting. There is no narrative or identity to confine the model in the space of the
finite, besides the supposed title, but even with that there is a myriad of implications associated
with the name of the Romani. The chaos of creation and its unfinished nature is unending as the
piece remains in a state of limbo, neither finished with creation or in a place of destruction. This
is eternally a singular transient moment, forever present.

**Class and Commodity**

Modernity and the nineteenth century are informed and often understood through the lens
of Marxist thought and theory. There is a connection between the works of the artist, his
depiction of women, and commodification. Because most of Boldini’s work is bourgeois
portraiture, there is an inherent aspect of class and Marxist undertones in his portfolio. This
unfolds his work to class analysis and the critiques that are implied by such. According to
Marxist theory, class struggle is a universal human experience under the life enveloping force
that is capitalism and commodification. Class struggle did not necessarily begin with Karl
Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, and it may not have even been something in the forefront
of Boldini’s mind. However, Marxist thought certainly highlights the key issues in the evolution
and development of western society, especially as it pertains to the treatment of women, both
theoretically in the arts and socially. Boldini emphasizes the burgeoning class conflict and the
inflation of people—specifically women—and their “possessions,” or spaces they occupy, as
commodities. His complicity in these issues of gender and class struggle is evident in this work
through his commodification of gender and identity.
The issues of gender and identity come to a head in Boldini’s *La Zingara*, as the subject is not a true portrait in the sense that she is no woman in particular. The alternative title is, as mentioned previously, *Portrait of a Woman*, in itself an obstruction of identity as the viewer is not given the model’s name, but rather just her gender. This allows for a plurality of sorts as she becomes a figure on which to project. By intentionally obscuring the face through formal characteristics, Boldini creates a sensation similar to a blank canvas, inviting the viewer to fill in the details themselves. It is easy to project one’s own psyche onto this woman as she is not uncanny in the sense of being too real, nor in the sense of not being at all human. She is human enough for the viewers to recognize that she is indeed a manifestation of humanity with aspects and traits that could relate to every woman, or rather every woman could find a piece of herself in *La Zingara*.

In this sense, the woman is relatable in the discussion of class and gender. Gender essentially acts as a social class in the nineteenth century, with women being a class below men. Even more rules and hierarchy are applied to people of color, but for the scope of this essay white bourgeois women being a class below white bourgeoise men will suffice. Clear allusions to Marxism and otherness exist herein as women, even though a part of the same species as men, find a different class holding because of their gender, effectively being othered by their femaleness, or possibly even commodified through their inherent otherness.

The subject of the Romani woman is a commodity to be purchased, made special through her inherent exoticism. This is informed by the possible interpretation of Boldini’s *La Zingara* as a type of Carmen, a highly marketable Romani woman. A connection of this kind would aid Boldini in the commodification of this piece, as a portrayal of a popular character could easily sell. This depiction of a Romani woman, and its underlying capitalistic connections, contributes
to the subjugation of women in art. Much like the character of Carmen being subjugated by her feelings, *La Zingara* is at the whims of men who want to control, or rather own, her. This ownership is intrinsically tied to her social-typing and the issues of gender that arise with this work.

**La Zingara as a Social Type**

Rather than giving his portrait a name, Boldini treats *La Zingara* as a social type by assigning her to a stigmatized and marginalized group. The representation of a Romani woman, who is given that marginalized identity to exoticize and other, ultimately leads to her commodification. This treatment as a social type corresponds with what frequently occurs in art depicting women and in relation to their participation in art history, whether as creators, muses, or models. As art historian Griselda Pollock notes in her essay, “Feminist interventions in the histories of art: an introduction”: “Women’s studies are not just about women – but about the social systems and ideological schemata which sustain the domination of men over women within the other mutually inflecting regimes of power in the world, namely those of class and those of race.”\(^54\) In Boldini’s *La Zingara*, the figure is more than just a woman, she is an exotic woman, placed in a caste completely different than that of the bourgeois woman. By capitalizing on this social type, Boldini is benefitting from a system of oppression that places women, especially women of color and non-western heritage, at a much lower social status. By benefiting from the trends of exoticism, Boldini fashions a new style that becomes heavily sought-after in terms of commissions and clientele.

While the painting remains unfinished, the dynamic lines that make up the piece are of special interest. They imply movement as well as a sort of rushed brush stroke, as if the subject were about to disappear, which comes from the Impressionist painting tradition of capturing the transient moment. The figure is made up entirely of macchie, that shared Macchiaioli technique utilized in Boldini’s portraiture. The painterly quality of the macchia more than just removes the woman from the narrative; it exoticizes her. She is made unknowable by the hastily applied paint, done in such a way as to obscure her identity from any recognizable features.

A Discussion of Spaces

There are other, less obvious ways in which Boldini exoticizes the figure of La Zingara; including both the space in which he places her and the occupation (or lack thereof) that she is given. Griselda Pollock argues that there is a connection between modernity and spaces, especially when analyzing a gender difference. She notes that many depictions of women in this period of art contain a barrier of sorts, a space that is reserved for women, and contributes to their subjugation by barring them from participating fully in the burgeoning modern society. Furthermore, Pollock notes that spaces are used for men to establish their dominance in terms of the avant-garde. Men utilize the bodies of women to claim their own modernity, to show off their achievements of innovation. Boldini follows in this fashion by creating an almost unidentifiable woman with a marred faced, and painterly figure and background, while crowning it with a vague title. To bring her into the narrative of modernity, he employs loose brushstrokes,

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Plural of macchia


otherwise known as the *macchia* in his native land, to exoticize his sitter, thus, creating a Marxist space of commodity and inviting class discourse.

The discussion of spaces can be applied much further than just literal spaces, as the one Boldini provides is not indicative of the natural world. The space of *La Zingara* is in the process of being created, or possibly destroyed. It remains unfinished, blemished, and even damaged by his brushstroke. There is no evidence of a larger narrative through space, as it simultaneously exists and ceases to exist before the viewers very eyes. By creating such a space, Boldini has allowed made room for the individual interpretation to complete his act of creation. He does these things by playing with the borders of the piece and by leaving the piece unfinished.

The unfinished nature of the piece can be understood in the context of Romani stereotypes. The Travelling Peoples are nomadic and are stereotyped thusly, summarized by Mérimée in his work: “to people of her [Carmen’s] race freedom is everything.”58 This is an aspect of the culture very well denoted by the name of this group. However, this space of nothingness created by Boldini for *La Zingara* inhibits her freedom, a supposedly intrinsic quality of the figure. She is a Traveller trapped in a limbo of a world; her body commoditized for the benefit of viewership.

The world in which she is trapped in seems to continue with the splotchy blackness in the bottom left corner, possibly intimating at an escape, either idealized or sought after by this woman.

In the nineteenth century, the Romani existed on the margins of society, politics, and economy.59 Margins are important in the discussion of Romani as well as in the discussion of space for *La Zingara*, as she exists in a marginal space on the fringes of creation. This depiction is both anachronistic and undefined. By giving hints of a bourgeois European world in *La Zingara* and thus failing to provide specificity of time or place, Boldini effectively exoticizes

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spaces in a way that is theoretically romantic, taking the viewer to an “anywhere but here” space. There is a border at the left side of La Zingara that looks very much like unprimed canvas, with some of the lines smudging out and beyond the confines of the space. This allows the viewer to consider a space beyond the canvas, and to contemplate what that open space may mean and perhaps to redefine the space that this woman inhabits. The lines cover up a black background, playing off the effects of tonality and chiaroscuro, to create a bright background that excises the figure from any sort of narrative. It acts as a barrier between her and the world she inhabits, and this is all done through the combination of line, tone, and color. By leaving a portion of the piece unfinished, Boldini leaves a space for the woman to continue, to go beyond the confines of the space provided her. At the same time, however, the unfinished space could act as a barrier, something that prevents her from participating in a full narrative. If the border were finished, perhaps more could be accurately said as to Boldini’s original intentions with the painting, and thus the identity and purpose of this woman, beyond consumption by the eyes of the viewer. However, the space and narrative are left immaterial, and up to imaginations of the viewers.

The immateriality of space leads one to grasp onto the materiality of the body in this work, made evident in the formal and contextual qualities of La Zingara. These aspects of an artwork are the sum of signs and circumstances, noted by Sidsel Maria Søndergaard in her introduction to Women in Impression. Additionally, she notes that female portraiture is always decorative in the sense that women become the art object, commoditized by the artist, consumer, and viewer, similar to what has been shown with Renaissance portraiture. The signs and circumstances painted on the canvas by the artist creates a harmony between the womanhood and

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fashion. This connection of the female body to the commodity of fashion is to be expected in an age where the expansion of global trade and goods grew like never before, thanks to the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Baudelaire seems unable to separate femininity from clothing, going so far as to say that the way a woman dresses is a part of the “pedestal of her divinity.” The materiality of femininity is subject to much scrutiny in this contemporary age, but very much plays into the part of the spectacle in the age of modernity.

Issues of Gender and Femininity

It seems that the liberation of women and their bodies in Impressionism was a double-edged sword of modernity. Women experienced unprecedented representation in art but were barred from full participation in male society. The notion of women is constantly shaped throughout the nineteenth century, and what it means to be a woman is an ever-changing process placed on the altar of modernity. During this time, women begin to be regarded as natural, but are still attached and denoted as beings belonging in the domestic sphere. This cognitive dissonance in consideration of women and the concept of femaleness plays into the artifice of portraiture. This depiction made by the hand of Boldini does not offer insight into the individual woman’s life, but rather into the artificial world of the bourgeois—a world where there are certain expectations and attitudes that are built onto the bodies of women. This space is left vague, alive in the imagination and dead in its creation. This ambiguity is rather a limbo, a realm of stasis in its creation and destruction. Regardless, the painting showcases Boldini’s love for female subjects, no matter how abstract or unfinished.

62 Ibid, 17.
63 Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays, 31.
In Jean-Louis Vaudoyer’s review of a show focused on Boldini’s oeuvre soon after the artist’s death, he stated that, “Boldini aima très tôt ce qu’il devait aimer toute sa vie: la pratique de la peinture; les spectacles du luxe; la société des femmes.”⁶⁴ There were three things that sparked Boldini’s interest: painting, spectacles, and women’s place in society, or perhaps their own version of society as they could not fully participate in the society of men. Vaudoyer noted that Boldini rose to popularity immediately after he arrived in Paris, having benefited from his Italian training while simultaneously diverging from it and creating a style of his own. Vaudoyer states, “Il se classe immédiatement comme peinture du high life,”⁶⁵ making note of his place in the upper echelons of the painting world and connecting him to the past nobilities of the Salon. However, further along, the reviewer tells us that Boldini is not concerned with the inner workings of his paintings but is only concerned with portraying them in his signature style: “Boldini ne veut et ne sait être qu’un peintre sensualiste. La vie intérieure, l'inquiétude, les aspirations intimes de ces femmes, Boldini ne s'en soucie pas; il n'y croit pas; il les nie.”⁶⁶ This is somewhat disconcerting as it seems that the artist, rather than caring for his subjects as one would be Romantically led to believe, is instead using La Zingara for her body, commoditizing, or possibly exploiting it in order to showcase his distinct aesthetic stylings.

In this work, Boldini creates a realm in which the woman exists uniquely and solitarily. This portrait easily fits into the era in which it was painted through its exhibition of signs of exoticism, Impressionism, Marxism, among other cultural frameworks. When comparing Boldini’s oeuvre with others of the epoch it is easy to note that Boldini treats his women

⁶⁶ Ibid, 17. “Boldini only wants and knows how to be a sensualist painter. The inner life, the anxiety, the intimate aspirations of these women, Boldini does not care; he doesn't believe it; he denies them.” Translated by the author.
unfairly—they are commoditized for the benefit of the viewer and perhaps even for the lining of his pockets. While his style is unique and beautiful, it has become another tool in the subjugation of women in art and contributes to treating woman as decoration. Boldini, while not necessarily a villain by design, has contributed to the problematic viewing of femaleness.

**Conclusion**

Exoticism and Boldini’s *La Zingara* work in tandem, as has been demonstrated in this thesis. There is no separation of the two in this particular piece. Victor Segalen, a French archaeologist, art theorist, and contemporary of Boldini, wrote an essay on exoticism which encourages his readers to strip exoticism to its bareness, until it is like a seed. He exhorts his audience to mentally take away the distant landscapes, the romanticized stories, the animals, the jewels, etc., and we are left with its innate potential. He stated, “It will seize all the sensory and intelligible riches that it meets in its process of growth, and, being filled with all these riches, it will revitalize and beautify everything.”67 The bareness of the seed is like the bareness of the context of *La Zingara* provided by Boldini. Although the figure is given a social type, she is a blank canvas for the viewer to cast their own projections.

The intention of nineteenth-century exoticism was to show the beauty of the “other,” and to establish the normalcy of the known. There is something to be said of intent versus impact, as what is intended is not always how things are understood or read as in a modern context. Regardless, Boldini’s *La Zingara* is like the seed described by Segalen, mysterious with bursting potential. Further research needs to be done on this topic but suffice it to say that Boldini has

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effectively created his own artistic language through the otherization and exoticization of *La Zingara* and uses this painting to increase his own worth as an artist.

Boldini’s unique aesthetic language serves to create a unique and fascinating portfolio of portraiture. Though capitalizing on the difficulties of exoticization, Boldini succeeds in showing beauty in a culture that is largely looked down upon in nineteenth-century Europe. All the problems of Orientalism continue to exist in critical analysis of the work, but to deny the beauty of representation would be a mistake. Although a more accurate representation is warranted, especially by such a marginalized community, the otherization of *La Zingara* is intentional, problematic, and done in a creative manner to bolster the technique and worth of the famed portraitist Giovanni Boldini. Through his commodification of gender, class, marginalized peoples, and the exoticism of said peoples in conjunction with his artistic heritage, Boldini creates an innovative piece that entices the viewer by its formal elements, but keeps the mind questioning at the underlying aspects of its inner most self. As the great American poet Gertrude Stein said, “Once time has established values in their correct order, Boldini will be recognized as the greatest painter of the last century. The New School (of painting) derives from him, as he was the first to simplify lines and planes.”68 His unique and distinctive style has afforded him a legacy that is conducive to academic research, and a greater place in the annals of art history.

Figure 1. Giovanni Boldini, *La Zingara* (Ritratto di Donna), n.d., Pitti Palace, Florence
Figure 2. Giovanni Boldini, *Ritratto di Alaide Banti*, n.d., Pitti Palace, Florence
Figure 3. Giovanni Boldini, *Alaide Banti al Pianoforte*, n.d., Pitti Palace, Florence
Figure 4. Giovanni Boldini, *Ritratto di Alaide Banti*, n.d., Pitti Palace, Florence

Figure 5. Jacques Callot, *Bohémien en voyage*, 1621, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton
Figure 6. Gustave Doré, A Gypsy Dancing the Zorongo, n.d., Private Collection
Figure 7. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *La Zingara*, 1865, Private Collection
Figure 8. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *La Zingara*, 1865-70, Private Collection
Figure 9. Édouard Manet, The Gypsies (Les Gitanes), 1862, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City
Figure 10. Édouard Manet, *Carmen*, 1880, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia


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