



The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing

Volume 48

Issue 1 *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly
Historical Writing*

Article 10

2019

The Allure of the Belle Époque: Giovanni Boldini's Portrait of Cléo de Mérode

Kayla Hofeling

Brigham Young University, abigailmorse96@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hofeling, Kayla (2019) "The Allure of the Belle Époque: Giovanni Boldini's Portrait of Cléo de Mérode," *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing*: Vol. 48 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol48/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Figure 1. Portrait of Cléo de Mérode by Giovanni Boldini, 1901.

Paper

The Allure of the Belle Époque Giovanni Boldini's Portrait of Cléo de Mérode

Kayla Hofeling

THE CHARM AND ELEGANCE OF PARIS IS UNPARALLELED IN ALL THE world. Much of this sentiment comes from the dazzling characters and artworks that were born from the culture of the Belle Époque, a time of rich splendor and luxury for the upper classes in late nineteenth-century Paris. One such character was the little-known Italian artist Giovanni Boldini, who spent the height of his career painting in the midst of the Belle Époque. His works comprise portraits and genre scenes of upper-class Parisian life; as “the Master of Swish,” his near-Impressionistic tendencies in these paintings perfectly capture the splendor of this period.

The forty-odd years during this “beautiful era” of Parisian life produced unique fashions and painting styles and saw the rise of the courtesan, an independent and often scandalous woman who made her own way in Paris. Boldini's portrait of one such woman, the highly famed dancer Cléo de Mérode (see figure 1), with its fanning brushstrokes and texturized, velvety tones impeccably encapsulates the exuberance and opulence of what it meant to be a Parisian female celebrity in the Belle Époque. Additionally, the unconventional artistic style of Boldini's portrait marks both him and Mérode as exemplary characters of the Belle Époque instead of displaying tendencies as avant-garde figures of the time.

Courtesans of the Belle Époque

The Belle Époque has been painted as a time of glittering luxuriousness amidst the feelings of gloom and doom in the *fin-de-siècle*, or the time at the end of the nineteenth century in which citizens across the western world were apprehensive about what the new century would bring. The sentiments surrounding the *fin-de-siècle* were not unfounded, based on the rapidly evolving technologies from the Industrial Revolution and the impending First World War.

It appears that The Belle Époque, however, stands out as a sort of gleaming bubble within this period. Here, favorable socioeconomic conditions allowed Parisians to enjoy displays of wealth like never before.¹ Artists like Giovanni Boldini flocked to Paris to document the period, and it has been stated that Boldini greatly catered to the tastes in portraiture during this time.² His long, dynamic brushstrokes were the perfect means to capture “a curling tress, a satin flounce, or a dainty gesture,”³ all telling features of the splendor of the era. Boldini immortalized the important figures of the day, from dandies to actresses, from children of wealthy parents to self-made stars.

One category in particular of these Belle Époque figures was a fundamental character of the Paris’s beautiful age: the courtesan. Like the newly appearing technologies that had been permeating western culture for several decades, the courtesan emerged from the changing nature of class structures within Paris. The courtesan was a young, beautiful woman—beauty had become an essential element for anyone who wanted to be someone—who often came from a very modest background, though the unsuspecting viewer of such a woman would never guess at this. She was an actress, not necessarily as an occupation, but certainly in her role as a courtesan. She was able to hide her humble past in a sort of “masquerade” in society; she was fashionable and socialized among Paris’s finest.⁴ Perhaps the most impressive part of the courtesan’s charade was that she was able to be a prostitute where only decades before, the common prostitute

1. Barbara Guidi, “Commercial Portrait Artists: Notes on the fin-de-siècle portrait painting market and the strategies of its key players,” in *Portraits of the Belle Époque*, ed. Tomàs Llorens and Boye Llorens (Barcelona, Spain: CaixaForum, 2011), 29.

2. Caroline Igra, “Reviving the Rococo: Enterprising Italian Artists in Second Empire Paris,” *Art History* 28 no. 3, (2005): 353.

3. Raymond J. Steiner, “Giovanni Boldini at The Sterling and Francine Clark Institute,” *Art Times* 26 no. 5, (March/April 2010): 12.

4. Stephen Gundle, “Mapping the Origins of Glamour: Giovanni Boldini, Paris and the Belle Époque,” *European Studies*, xxix, (1999): 275.

would have been cast from respectable society. She achieved this because she patronized only the extremely wealthy and elite members of society. All this made her a glamorous and desirable representation of such a woman.⁵

Additionally, the changing structures in social classes that allowed the courtesan to exist meant that each social class was more aware of the other. The upper class lost its closed-off nature and became a more accessible group of people. Because of this, the courtesan could now rise from her humble past and live among the elite.⁶

She was a New Woman, not in the sense that she was an outright feminist—she did not wear pants or do other “manly” things—but because she aspired to matter in some way, and she often achieved this through her moral freedom and economic independence. Though she did earn money from her suitors, she most often had a career of her own.⁷ The courtesan's occupation could be anything from a dancer or actress to a singer or acrobat. But one thing was always certain: the courtesan made her way into the high ranks of the enticing public sphere of the Belle Époque.⁸

Cléo de Mérode: Dancer and Courtesan

It is in Cléo de Mérode, a dancer with the Paris Opera Ballet, that we find the epitome of the courtesan. Mérode was born in 1875 to a baroness estranged from her husband. As she rose through the ranks of the Ballet, she gained much fame and attention, though it was less for her dancing than for her sensational beauty and her atypical, ear-hiding hairstyle.⁹ (We see this distinctive hairstyle in Boldini's portrait of her.)

She was not a prostitute in the strict sense, but she did lend herself as a nude model to Alexandre Falguière's *La Danseuse* (see figure 2). This statue created quite a controversy because it was a nude marble statue, like the Venuses of Antiquity, but the figure's unnaturally narrow waist indicated that the model

5. Gundle, “Mapping the Origins of Glamour,” 276.

6. Gundle, “Mapping the Origins of Glamour,” 273.

7. Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 21.

8. Michael D. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 49.

9. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, 2.



Figure 2. *La Danseuse* by Alexandre Falguière, 1896.

had used a corset; therefore, she was a real, contemporary woman. Moreover, the figure's telltale hairstyle was inevitably connected to Mérode, meaning that the model for the statue was not only contemporary, but also a bit of a notoriety.¹⁰ Of course, when directly questioned about it, Mérode defended her virtue by saying that she had only lent her head for the statue—though it is important to note that she was not exactly zealous in her defense, as any publicity was good publicity for a courtesan.¹¹

In fact, there were rumors flying for the duration of the Belle Époque that Mérode was having a licentious affair with King Leopold II of Belgium.¹² Whether or not these rumors were true is unknown, as Mérode had the same reaction to them that she did of the accusations that she had posed nude for the controversial *La Danseuse*. Notably, the scholar Michael Garval points out that in all photographs of Mérode from the period, she has a “strikingly blank expression” without any hint of a smile or the come-hither gaze that was so prevalent among photographs of other Belle Époque courtesans.¹³

Boldini's Portrait of Mérode

The dancing that put Mérode in the spotlight and the beauty that kept her there is flawlessly translated onto canvas in Boldini's portrait. In the work., Mérode is twisted in her seated position, though not unnaturally: her lower back arches, her shoulders press forward, and her head is turned, exposing her elegant neck. Belle Époque art called for a sensual view of the woman being portrayed, and this twisting pose both allows the viewer to see more of her body as well as hints at her pose being “a still version of the dancing body.”¹⁴ This

10. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, 20.

11. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, 18.

12. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, 2.

13. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, 46.

14. Gundle, “Mapping the Origins of Glamour,” 282.

pose reminded viewers of Mérode's background in ballet, but also markedly heightened her fame by making an understated but definitely visible reference to her role as a courtesan.

Mérode's typical blank expression does not appear in Boldini's portrait. In the painting, Mérode smiles coyly up through her lashes—but she is not looking at the viewer. She is not inviting the viewer to “come hither.” She seems instead to reserve her gaze for an unseen person in the wings.

A comparison of this piece with the photograph of Carolina “La Belle” Otero, a scandalous Belle Époque dancer and courtesan known for having numerous high-profile lovers,¹⁵ will reveal that Mérode and Otero are in strikingly similar positions, though Otero gazes straight out at the viewer (see figure 3). Mérode's redirection of her sensually inviting glance seems to be reflective of the way she answered the media's questions concerning her alleged affairs—she does not look directly at the viewer and was not open about her lovers in the way that many other courtesans were. But in the way that she does still have a flirtatious gaze, she did not boldly deny the rumors. This artistic tactic shows that Boldini certainly understood the mastery of portraiture to convey the innermost thoughts and personality of the sitter.



Figure 3. Photograph of La Belle Otero by Léopold-Émile Reutlinger, circa 1900.

Image of a Courtesan

From this work, we can see the great emphasis that courtesans such as Mérode placed on projecting their desired image. This glamorous and beautiful image was key to maintaining their status in society. It was a constant display of pretense designed to hide the courtesan's background—both her lowly past and her role as prostitute—and masquerade as always having been a part of high society.

15. Charles Castle, *La Belle Otero: The Last Great Courtesan* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1981): back cover.

(This was particularly applicable to Mérode: as a dancer, she spent her career in the theater, “a world of artifice.”¹⁶)

Here again we see how Boldini was the perfect match as a portraitist of the courtesan. It has been suggested that the care and detail he took to render the figure’s face emphasizes the fact that the swishing brushstrokes in the rest of the work are only “surface effect”—that the entire painting is just as much an artificial display as was the life of the subject in the painting.¹⁷ By contrasting these two very different types of brushstrokes in his portrait of Mérode, he hinted at the display she put on for the public. This certainly would not have been seen as a jab at the dancer, as it was common knowledge that her fame was built partly on rumors that she herself helped to fan by being so vague in her descriptions of the scandals. Rather, it was simply a nod to her life and position as a famed courtesan. Employing these techniques in his portrait of Mérode undoubtedly exemplifies the expectations of the elite in the Belle Époque and the ways that Boldini rose to meet such expectancies.

Boldini’s Niche

This was only one facet of Boldini’s talent as a Belle Époque artist. It has been argued many times that Boldini’s assimilation into the Belle Époque’s art world was done by conforming to the standards of the era in a type of commodification.¹⁸ He did this by capturing the essence of the culture—his vigorous, sweeping brushstrokes and rich tones were perfect for depicting the lush fabrics worn by Parisians in a time when fashion was becoming ever more important in society.¹⁹ It was especially important for high-society Parisians to commission portraits from the best Belle Époque artists, as photography was becoming increasingly commonplace. In order for these elite to set themselves apart, they commissioned portraits not in the hopes that they would be portrayed as refined and dignified, as had been done in the past, but instead to verify and enhance their style and fame.²⁰

16. Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 20.

17. Gundle, “Mapping the Origins of Glamour,” 281.

18. Igra, “Reviving the Rococo,” 353.

19. Gundle, “Mapping the Origins of Glamour,” 277–80.

20. Gundle, “Mapping the Origins of Glamour,” 277–78.

Therefore, an artist such as Boldini, who could beautify their features and enrich their expensive textiles, was the perfect choice for courtesans. This is immediately apparent in his portrait of Cléo de Mérode: her smooth, ivory skin contrasts with the texture of what seems to be a sort of shiny taffeta shawl and a matte black dress. Additionally, her hair, which earned her even more fame because of its distinctive style, is given special textural attention. Indeed, all these elements made Mérode famous—and Boldini's masterful depiction of them made him renowned.

As previously expressed, many scholars have seen Boldini's style of painting as a form of cheapening and commercializing his work. His tendency to accept mainly portraiture commissions and his style of painting glamorous women as elongated, smoothed-out, and altogether beautified is sometimes seen as conforming too much to the standards of high-society Paris instead of staying true to his own artistic talents and techniques.

It could be argued that just as Boldini turned to commodification of painting by catering to the Belle Époque culture, Mérode, too, was a sort of commercialization in herself. Her ear-hiding hairstyle greatly increased her publicity as the public speculated wildly about what exactly she was concealing.²¹ She did not exactly encourage rumors about her affairs or her modeling for a nude statue, but did little to quell them.²² And these elements of her fame are alluded to, whether directly or indirectly, by Boldini in her portrait.

This commercialization of Boldini's work has been described as extremely negative—that he “compromised [his] style and began to produce characterless work.”²³ From one perspective, this is true: he did paint in the way that people wanted him to instead of fitting a more avant-garde style that we have come to expect in modernist art.²⁴ However, I would like to propose that the way Boldini tailored his works to fit the desires of the Belle Époque elite was not a commodification, but that he was simply an artist with the right talents in the right place at the right time. After all, Mérode did not monetize her image simply for the money: she was also “in the right place at the right time, to play a pivotal role in the rise of modern celebrity culture.”²⁵ Both these figures were

21. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, 9–37.

22. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, 18.

23. Igra, “Reviving the Rococo,” 353.

24. “Boldini, Giovanni or Jean,” *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, Oxford Art Online, 31 October 2011.

25. Garval, *Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture*, 5.

purely products of their time, and it is this quality that makes them complementary to each other as well as what makes them both such rich examples of the Belle Époque culture and lifestyle.

Boldini and Mérode: Complementary Figures

To begin with, both figures were highly successful in the era. Boldini's works were the "sensation of the Paris salon;"²⁶ he did not paint anything in a style resembling the avant-garde tendencies of the time. This fact is what makes him a relatively unstudied artist today, as the artists we tend to remember from the early modernism period were ones who continually broke the rules and pushed the boundaries of painting—from the Impressionists to the Realists and from the Cubists to the Futurists. But it is also precisely this fact—that his style did not break the rules and was perfectly evocative of the elegance and charm that accompanied the Belle Époque—that allowed him to fit in so well and become the "sensation" that Parisians considered him to be.

Likewise, the same can be said of Cléo de Mérode. She was a courtesan, a relatively new development from the changing Parisian class structures, but she played the part of a modest Belle Époque courtesan perfectly. She caused just enough scandal to keep her name relevant. She also earned her own way instead of relying on a husband, but she was not a feminist New Woman who broke apart the accepted canon of what it meant to be a woman. It was this charade of playing the media to earn and maintain fame that made Mérode and others like her such a fundamental aspect of the Belle Époque.

By combining these two figures and their traits that set them firmly within the bounds of the Belle Époque instead of avant-garde characters, we see how each complemented the other. In Boldini's portrait, his vivacious strokes that highlight her sumptuous outfit and hair is exactly what made him so beloved among the upper class at the time. The way he captured her gleaming dress, hair, and jewelry and contrasted these with her minutely defined facial features, which conveyed her artificial lifestyle, was exactly the style of portrait that helped to elevate her status in society. Boldini understood Mérode's abilities to be exactly what the culture loved. In return for his success with this portrait and others, his name was traded among the elite society and he became an eminent

26. Philip Rylands, "Giovanni Boldini," *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 147 no. 1226 (May 2005): 348.

Belle Époque painter who gained more fame with each commission. Looking at it from this perspective, both Boldini and Mérode did not commodify their talents—they were in it for the glory, and that is precisely what the Belle Époque was all about.

A Rejection of Modernity

Another essential facet of the Belle Époque was a certain hesitancy to look forward to the future. This is evident in the sort of vacuum in which the courtesans and painters of the Belle Époque lived—their rejection of the malaise that accompanied the *fin-de-siècle* in the rest of the western world seems to say that they wanted to exist in the immediate present, not looking to the oncoming century, while preserving the splendor that had made Paris the center of the art world for centuries.

It has been stated by studiers of Boldini that his stylistic tendencies of loose, bold brushwork have a bit of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism to them.²⁷ Despite this, Boldini's rejection of the avant-garde is evident in the way that he never surrendered color to form in the way that these past movements of painters—modernist artists themselves *because* of their neglect of form—did.²⁸ Additionally, his vibrant colors never strayed from what the eye would see in real life; this is in complete opposition to other modernist portraits of the time, such as Matisse's well-known 1905 work *Woman with a Hat* (see figure 4). Boldini's way of looking to the art of the past instead of the future and firmly avoiding the avant-garde is representative of an entire generation of Belle Époque artists who desired to capture the elegance of the past and preserve the traditional painted portrait instead of surrendering to the modern "mundaneness of photographic reproduction."²⁹



Figure 4. *Woman with a Hat* by Henri Matisse, 1905.

27. Guidi, "Commercial Portrait Artists," 36.

28. Steiner, "Giovanni Boldini at The Sterling and Francine Clark Institute," 12.

29. Guidi, "Commercial Portrait Artists," 36.



Figure 5. Cléo de Mérode by an unknown photographer, circa 1903.

We see this impeccably exemplified in Boldini's portrait of Mérode: the fact that he painted her with the coy smile reserved for an unseen viewer instead of portraying her with the blank expression we see in photographs of Mérode (for example, see figure 5) shows that Boldini *knew* Mérode: he knew how to capture her essence, and he knew how to play up her sensuous side just enough to raise her popularity without compromising her integrity. This was something that, to Belle Époque artists like Boldini, photography could never accomplish. This fact implies that Boldini's so-called assimilation to the culture and subsequent monetization of his talents was not this at all, but instead was a conscious decision to maintain the lavishness that was so characteristic of the Belle Époque.

Conclusion

Giovanni Boldini's portrait of the dancer and courtesan Cléo de Mérode is a wonderful example of the dazzling splendor that was typical of the Belle Époque. Mérode's life as a courtesan meant that she enjoyed being in the spotlight, both on and off the stage, and her commissioning of a portrait done by Boldini was another way to reaffirm her elite status in society and her fine taste in fashion. Her choice of Boldini to paint this portrait was a perfect match: he knew exactly how to beautify her already lovely form, and he also knew exactly how to convey those parts of her personality that made her famous. Boldini's artistic style is an impeccable example of precisely the tastes in art and beauty that existed in the Belle Époque.

Unfortunately, the way that his style conforms exactly to the pendants of the era has been seen as a cheapening and commodification of his artistic abilities. However, a close examination of his talents and the personalities of his subjects—specifically through the lens of Boldini's portrait of Cléo de Mérode—reveals that Boldini intentionally belonged to an albeit small group of Belle Époque artists who consciously rejected the avant-garde techniques of other contemporary artists. This small group of artists instead desired to preserve the exquisiteness that made Paris the artistic center of Europe, and they

did this by looking to the past instead of the future. Boldini's style was not a way to monetize his paintings; it was simply a way to maintain the splendidous bubble in which the Belle Époque existed in the larger realm of the disheartening *fin-de-siècle*.

Boldini was not an avant-garde artist, and for this reason, he is not well-remembered by art historians today. But this does not mean that he cheapened his art in any way. In fact, Boldini's true talent lies in the way he looked to the past—this paved the way for his ability to communicate the glittering allure of his subjects and of the Belle Époque itself.

Kayla Hofeling recently graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in art history. She first fell in love with art history on a study abroad to London in 2016. Her areas of interest in the field include French Gothic architecture; Italian Baroque painting, sculpture, and architecture; English and German Romanticism; and Early European Modernism. While at BYU, Kayla minored in editing. She currently works as a website editor, email marketer, and social media coordinator for Andar Wallets. She lives in Mesa, Arizona, with her husband, and they are expecting their first baby in July.

