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James Tissot’s and Emile Zola’s Shopgirl:
The Working Girl as *La Parisienne*

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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

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This thesis argues for the cultural space of late nineteenth-century Parisian shopgirls as a position of power. The shopgirls’ role in society is an ambiguous position connecting fashion consumer culture, class divides, gender and identity perceptions, and the workspace. Using James Tissot’s Femme à Paris series, specifically the image Demoiselles de Magasin, and Emile Zola’s novel Au Bonheur des Dames as primary sources, I examine the role of the shopgirl as a liminal position within the definition of the iconic ‘La Parisienne’ woman. By looking at women’s work and the role of shopgirls in the boutique and department store world of fashion and consumerism, we can see how shopgirls’ unique position gives historical significance to this kind of work. By looking at painting and literature as primary media, we can see how pervasive the shopgirl and La Parisienne imagery really at this time. Using a feminist approach, this thesis shows how the shopgirl occupies a particular social space for women in nineteenth-century France, perhaps even a somewhat influential position in Parisian culture, as she is a primary facilitator in the fashion world for transmitting ‘taste’—a marketable branding tool of French fashion that permeates the iconic ideals of French fashion.

Keywords: James Tissot, Emile Zola, la parisienne, shopgirl, Paris, Au Bonheur des Dames
TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE ................................................................................................................................................. i
ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. ii
Introduction ................................................................................................................................................... 1
The Department Store and Women............................................................................................................... 2
La Parisienne ................................................................................................................................................ 7
Zola’s Shopgirl ............................................................................................................................................ 11
Tissot’s Shopgirl ......................................................................................................................................... 23
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 35
FIGURES .................................................................................................................................................... 37
BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................................................... 46
Introduction

One facet of the elusive La Parisienne is her ability to negotiate the public sphere as a modern woman. La Parisienne is complicated and has various personas to be sure, but the shopgirl, the working middle-class young women who staffed boutiques and department stores, is often forgotten and not given the proper attention in discussions of nineteenth-century French art. The bourgeois woman in this context has been rehashed countless times, as will be discussed in subsequent sections, but the shopgirl remains to be explored as a viable position for women during this historical period.

In this thesis, I argue that shopgirls exercised agency and freedom in the public domain. These women worked and participated in the fashion world of Paris, which in turn shaped the entire world’s view of fashion and shopping. Shopgirls occupy a liminal space—meaning they are at a boundary between classes and genders and fill an initial role in the fashion consumer process. These exceptional women facilitate in the consumer world, having a place in society unlike other women of their day. This thesis adopts a feminist perspective on the shopgirl and her power in the fashion world, and also highlights the possible misperception or exaggeration of the sexualized nature of shopping and consumer culture. Because of this simplification of the history of shopping, working women like the shopgirl have lacked the proper credit in their contribution to shaping culture and society.

In both Emile Zola’s novel Au Bonheur des Dames (or The Ladies Paradise) and James Tissot’s painting Demoiselles de Magasin (figure 1), part of his Femme à Paris painting series (figures 2-8), the shopgirl represents one part of the broader modern women—La Parisienne. Zola’s main character Denise Baudu is an exceptional example of a woman who knows her value in both business and romantic relationships. She learns to adopt the characteristics of a modern woman, gaining power in the department store world. Tissot’s paintings show a similar chutzpah with figures that reflect the social ambiguity, power, and ascendancy available to shopgirls. Both show what was perhaps the unachievable ideal or rare exception for women at that time, contributing to the repetition of La Parisienne in artistic and literary expression. Thus the shopgirl is part of the broader definition of La Parisienne, and despite being
often overlooked and over-sexualized in past studies, the shopgirl contributes in a liminal position of power as a modern working woman in the fashion and consumer world of fin-de-siècle France.

**The Department Store and Women**

This section discusses various scholarship around women and department store consumptive practices, highlighting what has been covered in their analyses, and more importantly identifying gaps in the studies.

Ruth Iskin’s book *Modern Woman and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Paintings* re-evaluates and examines the cultural context of Impressionist paintings in Parisian consumer culture.¹ In argument and form, Iskin’s work is foundational for this thesis; however, she lacks focused attention on the department store and the shopgirls. She looks at paintings showing women as consumers, sellers, and producers in various sites such as the millinery boutique, theater, opera, cafe, concert, and market. By revising the women represented in these spaces, Iskin clarifies women’s roles in modernity and public spaces. This is very important as she corrects and adds upon older scholarship with a feminist lens. She pays particular interest to the multiplicity of gazes and the privilege of the male gaze. Iskin’s feminist approach shows women in these paintings as more active subjects and delves into the relationship between these represented women and the broader French national identity with the fashion of the day. She analyzes the consumer culture by looking at advertising, commodity displays, and shop front views of Paris. Iskin includes over ninety illustrations of Impressionist paintings and supports her arguments with ample visual, literary, feminist, and historical sources.

Iskin’s chapter “The Chic Parisienne: A National Brand of French Fashion and Femininity” speaks to the breadth of representations of this iconic woman.² *Les Parisiennes* were the makers of fashionability and taste. The countless images of this ideal woman are found not just in paintings, but in the fashion plates, illustrations of sales catalogs, photographs, posters and shop displays, and sculptures

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Iskin argues that these images of women marked an important transition for femininity and modernity and between national and gender identity. This in turn supported the French fashion industry and promoted colonial ambitions. Iskin’s argument connects *La Parisienne* to the larger French and world consumer fashion market, giving women a greater space in cultural history. Her book discusses the shopgirls’ involvement in the fashion consumer culture, but there is room for a more specific argument. I build on Iskin’s cogent argument about *La Parisienne* and her insights on Degas’ millinery paintings. This will show how the shopgirl is part of the definition of the modern woman and how Tissot’s painting captures similar ideas found in Degas’ millinery paintings.

Aruna D’Souza’s seminal work titled “Why the Impressionists Never Painted the Department Store,” gives context to the dearth of imagery around the department store. Degas’s milliner shop paintings are exceptional because they show intimate scenes between boutique shopgirls and bourgeois clientele. D’Souza offers that Degas’s paintings show “an enforced distance—here imagined as a view through the shop window—between the flâneur-artist and his subject, a distance that was strangely out of sync with the assumption of total visual possession of the city offered by the fiction of flânerie.” She suggests that because of the nature of flânerie and the coding of the department store and shopping as a female territory, the department store itself becomes a “sort of blind spot in the literature and visual culture of the bourgeois man.” As a site of modernity, the department store was designed primarily for female bourgeois clientele and the separation of male and female shoppers, and thus the lack of visual representation about such. D’Souza briefly references the shopgirls who worked at the department stores, but does not adequately credit their contribution to the store or their interactions with the clientele.

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1Iskin does not address Tissot, who is often ignored in Impressionist analysis because he didn’t apply the token brushstroke and style of other Impressionists, even though he did strive to paint modernity and was closely associated with many Impressionist painters.
3Ibid, 137.
5Ibid, 139.
glossing over the limited information about them. She also briefly references Tissot’s *Demoiselle de Magasin* and Tamar Garb’s interpretation on this painting. Despite being a staunch feminist, D’Souza does not address the connection of the department store and shopgirls therein, or explore their significance to women in the workforce and the fashion industry. This thesis further explores the connection between Degas’ milliner paintings and the social ascendency available to shopgirls.

Another recent and powerful argument about the consumer culture of fin-de-siècle France is presented in Lisa Tiersten’s *Marianne in the Market.* Here she uniquely approaches the “circulation of ideas about taste and the market: a history, that is, of a particular intellectual currency or imagined aesthetic economy,” showing how bourgeois taste acted as a regulatory social force in French culture. But throughout all the problematized parts of the new marketplace, the French emphasized aesthetics and taste which “endowed the marketplace interaction with rationality and disinterestedness, permitting and relationship to goods connoting power rather than vulnerability, probity rather than corruption and refinement rather than vulgarity.” The bourgeois reinforced taste and the notion of chic, bringing a moralizing effect to the marketplace otherwise tainted by capitalism, greed, and materiality.

This moral market is more than a controversy about gender (since women were the new consumers in the public marketspace); it is a bigger national issue about the market and the republic and how the individual contributes to the larger moral community. The consumer acts as citizen, actively reinforcing the values that are taken back to the virtuous republic home. This consumption was a “feminine form of exercising bourgeois citizenship… and served to confirm rather than challenge male
authority.”  

Modern consumerism identifies the shoppers as developing a liberal individualism that can be seen as destructive to the republican political culture and national identity; but Tiersten argues that the French collective desire for aesthetic taste raised the consumers from selfish and impulsive silly women to constructors of national identity through taste. These women become what Tiersten calls “aesthetic guardians” of taste, whose collective efforts reinforced the value of French commodities worldwide and Paris as the center of modern consumption. Consumption occurred at the individual level but had a wider goal and vision within French nationalistic terms. She writes: “In the vision projected by the market, commercial growth and the diffusion of goods promised not fractious individualism but a republic of social space and plenty, and the Parisienne—a mother at first, but also a consumer a citizen—was its emissary.”

Tiersten addresses the various bourgeois women and identifies them as La Parisienne, but fails to include more than passing nods to the women who sold the products. As the shopper takes home the goods, they transmit the taste and fortify the nationalistic ideal of the French aesthetic. Tiersten established the meta argument and theoretical effect of this consumer economy, but doesn’t speak to the shopgirls, who as liminal figures in the fashion world contributed to this effect. Her focus is not about gender or the far-reaching effects of women in the workplace. However, her arguments build a solid foundation for the expansive influence of the French fashion world and give place for shopgirl figures to be more noticed in their contribution.

Two formative texts that are still often referred to in Zola and late 19th century scholarship include Michael Barry Miller’s The Bon Marché and Rosalind Williams’ book Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France. Miller gives an in-depth historical look at the first department store in Paris with thorough explanation and description of the store itself, the patrons, and

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13 Ibid, 235.
14 Ibid, 236.
15 Lisa Tiersten, email message to author dated June 14, 2016—“the argument about the shopgirl as fitting into the category of the la Parisienne is very compelling. Unfortunately, there hasn't been much work done on the shopgirl in the last couple of decades.”
employees, products, and marketing techniques.\textsuperscript{16} The department store in Zola’s \textit{Au Bonheur des Dames} was modeled after the Bon Marché. Miller does not write with any specific attention to gender or with any particular emphasis on shopgirls. He is factual and gives a detailed scope of the store and time, but falls back onto the literary scope of Zola for persuasive effect.\textsuperscript{17}

Published just one year after Miller’s \textit{The Bon Marché}, Rosalind Williams’ book \textit{Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France} has become one of the formative texts about consumption in this era.\textsuperscript{18} Like many scholars who approach this time period, she begins with reference to Zola’s \textit{Au Bonheur des Dames} and treats it as a sort of fictional, yet truthful, primary source. William’s extensive book reads more like a historical narrative with methodical explanation of the history and implications of those changes.\textsuperscript{19} Williams does not address any of this from a gender standpoint, but does talk about women briefly in various contexts.\textsuperscript{20} Williams knowingly sees the error within consumerist studies—that all the social ills of consumptive practices are based on derogatory assumptions of women and female sexuality—but fails to redeem the association of female submission to organic needs.\textsuperscript{21} This gendering of consumerism is grossly propagated in nineteenth-century French and Zola studies; however, some have attempted to retrace and reclaim women from this historical inaccuracy.\textsuperscript{22} By constantly

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\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. Miller’s tone and writing aims to be unbiased, factual and well researched. His information of the internal and employee structure is helpful for a foundation of department store dynamics, but Miller does not attend to women and their modern role in the context of French consumer culture. The lack of discussion about women shades the book with misogynistic undertones.

\textsuperscript{18} Rosalind H. Williams, \textit{Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. Williams details the implications of the ‘dream world’ of the consumer revolution as it spread from France and changed along the same time technologies, economies and social structures changed.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. Williams’ discussion of women in various contexts: women in \textit{art nouveau} images, clothing and commercial images, attendance at expositions, how feminism and consumerism allied, invention of salons, the stereotypical shopper, \textit{La Parisienne}, and, of course, Zola’s \textit{Au Bonheur des Dames}.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 308, emphasis added. When talking about the stereotypical shopper, Williams repeatedly condemns women as: “[c]reatures of consumption par excellence...Women are the ones who crowd into department store like \textit{Au Bonheur des Dames}, who urge their henpecked husbands to buy round furniture for chic apartments, who gape at fashion displays in the expositions, who in \textit{“La Parisienne”} furnish the symbol of the exposition itself. To a large extent the pejorative nature of the concept of consumption itself derives from its association with female submission to organic needs.”

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referencing shoppers as out-of-control, even hysterical women, or by always referring to the working saleswomen as sexually available, historians have limited and sexualized consumer culture, degrading women’s involvement in this sphere. Others seek to give women a ‘space’ in the locations of modernity with success, but each likewise fail to adequately address the shopgirl as a liminal position of cultural power.\(^{23}\) Williams, like many scholars, if not all, in fin-de-siècle studies, references Zola repeatedly, but her treatment of the female characters like Denise, fails to give cultural significance to the shopgirl.

**La Parisienne**

The inclusion of the shopgirl in the definition of *La Parisienne* is important because of the breadth of the power of this figure. Women in late nineteenth-century Paris experienced greater political freedom in the public sphere, with more access to education, financial stability, legal powers, and opportunities through philanthropic work.\(^{24}\) This expansion of agency and political opportunity contributed to the shaping of an iconic public persona of Parisian women. Ruth Iskin explains the definition of the iconic figure: “*La Parisienne* became the generic term for describing the essence of a particularly modern, peculiarly French form of femininity, which could, ostensibly, encompass women of all classes by a shared ‘je ne sais quoi,’ a quality which none could put their finger on but all professed to recognize when they encountered it.”\(^{25}\) This femininity consisted of a sophisticated, fashionable and worldly approach to modern life connoting “an urban creature, whose tantalizing presence and mysterious allure was linked to the enchantment and potential dangers of the modern metropolis.”\(^{26}\)

*La Parisienne* is the quintessential fashionable woman of Paris. She exudes the personality of Paris. She isn’t necessarily French but has adopted the city of Paris and is comfortable and confident.

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\(^{23}\) See Heidi Brevik-Zender, *Fashioning Spaces* (University of Toronto, Toronto Press, 2015) and D’Souza, “Impressionist Department Store,” 129-147 to see the artistic, literary and physical spaces available to women at this time.


According to Iskin there are three types of women in Paris: La Parisienne, French, and foreigners. Actual nationality has no bearing. She is beautiful and fashionable but her confidence does not come from the exterior. She radiates savoir-faire and is a distinctive icon for taste, style and the definition of chic. Her clothing is fashionable, but never ostentatious, nor would it draw attention. She is womanly and alluring, but not blatantly sexy. Her hair and styling would be fresh and clean. She would have an air of know-how and be comfortable in public. She is intelligent and of good moral upstanding, with common sense and creativity. She knows how to put outfits together and knows the balance of the various compartments. Her language, education, and composure reflect the decided confidence of this exceptional woman. She is what every woman in Paris wants to be, and because Paris is the fashion capital of the world, every woman in the western world wants to be her. She was educated in politics, religion, art, fashion, sexuality (but not promiscuity), and motherhood. She was the complete package and yet an achievable ideal. A woman can “choose to turn into a Parisienne...all that matters is that a woman lives in Paris.”

By living in Paris, the woman could be exposed to the requisite fashion magazines, journals, department stores and their catalogs, and the flâneries of the streets, including people-watching, posters, shop windows, and, of course, the shopping.

The pervasiveness of La Parisienne iconography, over the course of several decades, is especially important to the ideal French woman as a marketable icon. The image of La Parisienne was everywhere, and yet it was still elusive when talking about a particular person. La Parisienne could be seen in advertisements, fashion magazines, window displays, theatrical plays, the giant sculpture for 1900 World Exhibition, newspapers, wax museums, paintings, caricatures, panoramas, and sale catalogs. The proliferation of imagery makes it more difficult to pin down a strict definition but also shows the extent to

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27 Iskin, Modern Women, 192-197.
28 Iskin, Modern Women, 192.
30 Iskin, Modern Women, 192.
31 Ibid. Iskin speaks to the enormous La Parisienne statue for 1900 World Exhibition, (figure 9) as an international symbol of taste and style. The statue symbolized Paris as “an internationally reigning queen, enforcing the superiority of Parisian fashion… the national image in an intensifying international competition” Iskin, Modern Women, 218.
which this idea permeated society. Painters such as Monet, Renoir, Tissot, Morisot, Cassatt and others depicted *La Parisienne* in one form or another. These types of paintings show the modern fashionable woman in her various roles around the city as wife, mother, shopper and empowered modern woman. Despite recurring imagery of this iconic woman, images of the shopgirl and the department store or boutiques are scarce, showing a gap in the artistic depictions and illuminating why, for the most part, these women have been historically ignored.

Unfortunately, the shopgirl is often conflated with the more derogatory and negative views surrounding *la grisette* figure. *Les grisettes* are working class women of the garment and millinery district who are known for their cheap gray dresses and coquettish, bohemian behavior, and as people who succumb to the dangers of the modern metropolis. *La grisette* complicates the shopgirl’s presence in the category of *La Parisienne* because this woman cannot be both working and iconic, nor can she be a loose or fallen woman. During this time, “paid employment of any sort… was out of bounds for the respectable bourgeois” and seen as “an abandonment of their family responsibilities and ties.” But these workers in the garment industry were not married upper-class women. They were single, working-class women and even with a job, many women turned to prostitution to make ends meet. *La grisette* is valued for her sewing skills and for the selling of her body. The shopgirl does not sell a handiwork, but rather a persona of *La Parisienne* complete with clothing, styling, etiquette and demeanor. As we will see, the character of Denise is able to withhold sexual favors to elevate her status and power within this sphere and accomplish more good. Others in the novel may behave like *la grisette*, but these women are not the ideal who strives to encompass the grace of *La Parisienne*.

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33 Iskin, *Modern Women*, 198. Examples include Monet *Camille (Woman in the Green Dress)* of 1866 and his *Woman with Parasol* (1875); Renoir’s *La Parisienne* (1874); Manet’s *Spring* of 1882 and *In the Conservatory* (1879); Morisot’s *Before the Theater* (1875–76), and Cassatt’s *The Cup of Tea* (1879).


37 Ibid.
Shopgirls are one facet of the cyclical flânerie of shopping, perpetuating the vast definition of La Parisienne, as they dressed the part and sold the clothing to other wealthier Parisian women. They sell directly to women, as live models in the store showing the fashions and carefully projecting the persona, as well as the latest styles. Iskin notes that “sales women working in elite fashion houses and in department stores were modeling outfits for the more important women customers… The live models learned to adopt the poses of La Parisienne in fashion plates.” Without the shopgirls in the women’s department or in boutiques there would be a gap in the selling and consuming.

La Parisienne extends beyond the bourgeois class because of the inherent definition of the word as previously defined: a woman who chooses to live in Paris and be immersed in the fashionable culture actively striving for confidence, style, class and poise in dress and demeanor. There is no limitation based on class, nationality, race, or religion. Shopgirls’ power comes from their liminality—between class divisions and between the shop owners and patrons. When women have a role outside their normal gender-coded roles, they possess more social mobility and power. Ellen Koskoff speaks to the liminal women “(ie. shamans, prostitutes, midwives, lesbians, witches and so on)” that have more musical freedom because of their position outside gender norms. Similarly, shopgirls are a category of women apart from the gender norms of Parisian life. They do not subscribe to the traditional virtuous housewife role, nor the clandestine prostitute, masquerading as something more reputable. As part of the La Parisienne, yet separate from other women in this iconic category, shopgirls embody an empowered space for women in the consumer world. This power is a subtle persuasion as she assists in the shopping and buying process, thus influencing the everyday fashion of the bourgeois women. As a collective, shopgirls also have influence in the blurring of social and class lines as they compare visually to the bourgeois women to whom they sell.

39 Iskin, Modern Women, 201.
41 Clayson, Painted Love, 113. “Many of those who worked in certain of the classic female profession in Paris, such as the needles trades, were suspected of being prostitutes behind the cover of an honest job.” Ibid, 113.
As the nineteenth century closed, the modern woman became more diverse—this includes the working class. The bourgeois undoubtedly still control much of the system surrounding taste and style, but the shopgirl is part of that system and actively contributes to the shaping of fashion culture. The shopgirl’s agency and power is what needs to be corrected and added upon within the feminist scholarship surrounding art historical perspectives on the department stores and shopping. For example, Zola’s various shopgirls in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, especially the ideal Denise, give a spectrum of the different kinds of working women. Likewise, Tissot’s anonymous shopgirl has an ambiguous personality, but can represent the many girls working in a boutique, even the department store environment. The blurring of class lines between shopgirls and bourgeois women is especially important and will be further explored with Zola’s novel and visual representations of shopgirls and milliners.

**Zola’s Shopgirl**

Much, if not all, of the scholarship surrounding fin-de-siècle consumer culture is rooted in some way to Emile Zola’s literary works and essays. Yes, he took meticulous notes on the real department stores and the real happenings in them, but it is interesting to notice that across the various fields of art history, history, sociology, psychology and so on, the notion of shopping, department stores, and the sexualization of women in this environment always connects back to writings of Zola. First, I will discuss some of the major tropes found in *Au Bonheur des Dames* that related to his oversexualization of women. Oversexualization in this context means that the women are seen as objects to be possessed and controlled, with an emphasis on their physicality and sexual appeal, both as a fantasy and real desire. Next, I will discuss consumerism scholarship that have built on or rejected Zola’s overly sexualized view of consumerism in late nineteenth-century France. By examining and then disputing this oversexualized view of women in the consumer culture, we can better see how the shopgirl, as a liminal figure in the consumer landscape, acts as a guiding influence in shaping positive views of women, work, taste and fashion.
Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* (or *The Ladies Paradise*) is the eleventh book in his Rougon-Macquart series, first published in 1883. This story tells of the employee lives and inner workings of the first department store in Paris. The Paradise, the name of the fictive store in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, is in fact, the main character of the novel. Zola applies many of Charles Fourier’s ideas about ‘phalanstères’ as the department store itself becomes a completely self-sufficient utopian society. Octave Mouret is the womanizing and charming owner of the store who eventually falls for Denise Baudu, the misfit country-girl who has incredible spirit and daring business ideas. As the novel progresses, we see the effects of the department store on the consumer culture of Paris, the dynamics of the employee relations, and the power—financially, culturally and individually—of the department store as a business entity.

The Paradise was designed with special interest in women’s pleasures and visual fantasy. Zola describes shoppers who are primarily upper-class women and the store is designed to attract and seduce the women into spending and consuming. Marketing gimmicks targeted women because shopping was coded as a feminine activity. The store was filled to maximum capacity with items to purchase, so the shoppers would be visually over-stimulated. As Vanessa Schwartz describes in *Spectacular Realities*, historically the collective social experience in the emerging metropolis was one of specular fantasies and consumption. The collective crowd was interested in everything visual that they could consume. The department store was part of that consumption with physical products covering every inch—a dazzling and curious sight to behold. In other situations, the crowd was also deeply interested in looking. Flânerie in the streets, public morgue visits, wax museums, mass press, advertisements, posters, panoramas, photography, and even early cinema offered the crowd endless opportunities to consume visual culture around them. The department store was just one of many places to consume and these pleasures of the day.

Denise and other saleswomen in the department store occupy a liminal space in society because of their unique bridge between middle class and bourgeois and more importantly, because they are means

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43 Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 100.
by which the moralizing aesthetic taste is transmitted. Denise remains virtuous and separate from the promiscuity throughout the novel. Because of her unique ability to remain sexually pure, her personality, and development of business skills, Denise is one of the few main characters that I would classify as part of the definition of La Parisienne. As she moves to Paris she develops the class, savvy, and determination that a self-sufficient, talented, and accomplished Parisian woman would possess.

The department and the customers expect the shopgirl to act, dress, and sell a certain way. A shopgirl’s fiscal success comes both from the department management’s salary and commissions from customers. To achieve this success required an element of acting here with clothing and styling. These saleswomen would be given a black silk taffeta uniform, subtle but fashionable, and expected to know how to fashion themselves accordingly. On Denise’s first day entering women’s wear, she sees a group of shopgirls gathered together “in silk dresses and looking very pert with their curled chignons and their crinolines swept back,”44 a very intimidating pack for a country girl to approach. After Denise is hired as a shopgirl, she too is given “the uniform of her department, a dress of black silk, altered to fit her,” but unfortunately for Denise, “it was still too big, too wide across the shoulders.”45 These working girls would not normally own and wear silk on a daily basis. They are dressing up to be on par with their bourgeois clientele. The dresses are black in color and subdued, but the cut and fit needs to comply with fashion standards. For Denise, the ill-fitting uniform causes herself and the management embarrassment as she doesn't yet look or act the part of a Parisian shopgirl—she is a mis-fit.46 But Denise adapts quickly by using her fine sewing skills to fit her dress to her figure. After only one embarrassing day, she returns wearing the altered dress:“Her silk dress was not too big, but hugged her shapely figure, fitting against the pure lines of her maidenly shoulders.”47 But the black silk dress was not the only item that needed attention.

46 Ibid, 118.
Denise’s shoes and hair also presented a problem for her dress and comportment at The Paradise. Denise had loud heavy boots that were not only distracting, but painful for her feet after a long day of standing and assisting customers. Eventually she saves enough to buy a pair of new, more comfortable and more stylish shoes. Fortunately, Denise was blessed with one attractive feature—her hair. But it was a large unruly mane that did not conform to La Parisienne standards. So, she had to learn new styling techniques to manage her golden mop of hair. Denise begins to fit into the fashion standards of La Parisienne as she adjusts her hair and clothing.

After a specific recommendation from management, Denise learns how to best adapt and become the kind of Parisian woman that could influence those around her. After Mouret rather forwardly and thoughtfully tries to tame Denise’s wild mane, he gives this advice:

‘Anyway, Mademoiselle, try to pay attention to your appearance. You are not in Valognes any longer, study our Parisian women. While your uncle’s name may have been enough to open the door of our firm to you, I would like to think that you will live up to the standard you seem to promise.’

Mouret’s advice to study Parisian women is exactly what Iskin addresses as she describes who can become La Parisienne. Referencing Georges Montorgueil’s illustrated La Parisienne, Iskin quotes “No matter where a woman comes from she can choose to turn into a Parisienne… it is city that a woman adopts, all that matters is that a woman live in Paris.” Arriving in Paris and at The Paradise scared and awkward, Denise takes this advice to study the Parisian women to heart and it gives her great courage. She leaves Mouret’s office with a newfound sense of bravery and poise, which stems from a cheerful intellect and determination to take obstacles in stride “simply and naturally, because her whole nature was in this invincible gentleness.” This attitude proves vastly important in Denise’s work ethic and in the end pays off, more than her appearance. By developing a more careful sense of style and maintaining a cheerful attitude with the demanding work, Denise is well on her way to becoming an influential shopgirl and La Parisienne.

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48 Ibid, 51, 117.
49 Ibid, 89, 118.
50 Ibid, 119.
51 Iskin, Modern Woman, 192.
52 Zola, Au Bonheur des Dames, 119.
One major role that helps Denise learn the behavior of *La Parisienne* and promote sales within the department store is the shopgirls’ role as part time models for the clothing and accessories. The way they present the fashion determines how much is purchased. Because customer satisfaction, pleasure, and entertainment is so important, these saleswomen need to showcase the clothes live for the customer. Denise awkwardly and embarrassingly learns this the hard way as she is forced to model heavy coats for Madame Desforges. It is a physically demanding task for Denise, as well as humiliating. Denise’s experience is described: “The noise of the crowd ran in her head and she felt herself swaying, her muscles aching from lifting and carrying whole armful of clothes, a kind of exercise that she had never done. However, she has to obey, letting Marguerite put the coat on her as on a model.”53 Then in an insulting way, hoping to make the sale, Madame Aurelié says, “You understand, it doesn’t come across on this young lady who is not at all shapely… Now, Mademoiselle, stand up straight and show it off to advantage.”54 Denise feels “ashamed at being turned into a machine which they felt free to scrutinize and laugh at,” but things only progress from bad to worse as the customer, Madame Desforges, the lover of Mouret, and Mouret himself join in with further insults, mocking her dress, fit, and hair. This rude and mean introduction to ‘how to model’ made Denise feel “as though she had been raped, stripped bare, left defenseless.”55 This harsh language conveys how raw and used Denise feels. The department store is a harsh world with people who care more about money than people. But despite this heart-wrenching personal attack on Denise, she quickly learns, gains sales skills, and outstrips the entire department. She eventually reigns with grace and gentleness—a human and personal touch that was previously lacking.

As Denise rises within the ranks at the Paradise, she develops into *La Parisienne*, complete with the style, self-confidence, beauty, intelligence, and business *savoir-faire* capable of making real changes. Mouret’s reaction to Denise’s transformation is unsurprising, as this is what he hoped for and expected with her background:

53 Ibid, 112.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid, 113.
He would admit defeat, she was as intelligent as she was beautiful, her intelligence coming from the best of her being...the most far reaching business ideas, borrow of practical experience, sprouted from behind that narrow forehead, its clear lines revealing her will power and love of order.  

Denise becomes this ideal to strive for, encompassing the qualities of La Parisienne because of her intelligence, not just her beauty and style. A woman who simply learns how to dress according to the fashion of the day does not automatically qualify as La Parisienne. There is more to her, and in the case of Denise, it stems from a goodness of character and practical intelligence in the workplace. Denise is so adept at her job that she is promoted to buyer and conceives of the idea of a children’s department, which she then manages, much to the chagrin of those who criticized and mocked her humble start. But despite her newfound power in the workplace, Denise “remained calm and charming in her triumph,… she greeted the slightest expression of friendship with laughter and joy, which made her really loved by some because she was so kind and welcoming, always read to give her heart.” She really is the best fit for the new children’s department because of a natural tendency to love and get on well with children. Zola describes this idyllic fit saying, “You had to see her in her department, surrounded by her tribe of children of all ages. She loved children, so she could not be better placed.” In a pseudo-maternal role, Denise echoes the imagery of La Parisienne in posters with her children fashionably dressed and out and about in the streets and shops of Paris (figure 9). This maternal instinct and subtle control within the store is part of what makes Denise and other shopgirls part of the broader definition of La Parisienne.

Denise’s promotion to buyer and head of the children’s department is a historical rarity for a woman in her position. Theresa M. McBride’s “A Woman's World: Department Stores and the Evolution of Women's Employment, 1870-1920” details the facts around the women in the department stores, noting the power struggle between men and women in this environment:

At the highest level of the sales hierarchy were the department heads, chefs de rayons, and their assistants, whose responsibilities included not only sales, but also the ordering of merchandise for their own divisions and the hiring and supervision of sales personnel… Significantly, men made

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56 Ibid, 327.
57 Ibid, 345.
58 Ibid, 346-347.
59 Ibid
up the majority of department heads and assistants, though a few women managed to win out against the intense competition to head departments.\textsuperscript{60} In the novel, the reader senses the competition between the shopgirls for commissions, but the underlying tension about Denise being raised to such a coveted position is not explicitly expressed. This promotion was rare for women and would have been a great honor and responsibility for Denise. Perhaps Zola includes this advancement as an expression of approval and support for female empowerment in the workplace. Or possibly because he saw the Paradise as a complete utopian society and having a woman rise in the ranks would fit into this idealized fantasy. Regardless of why it is included, Denise’s power is further shown through her idealized sexual purity.

One important facet to the power that Denise held within the Paradise is in her refusal to Mouret’s advances, thus maintaining a purity of morals. When the other employees thought her advancement was an exchange for sexual favors, Denise is condemned, but because her virginal status prevailed, their opinion and respect grows. Then because of her power over Mouret, Denise is able to make more formal changes in the store. Zola describes Denise’s transition as giving a voice and strength to the department store proletariat:

So there was a change in people’s opinion of Denise… it was generally acknowledged that she had not given in and that her omnipotence resulted from her refusal. From then on, she became popular. The kindness that people owed her were not overlooked and she was admired for her strength of will. Here, at last, was some who had the boss by the throat and was avenging them all because she knew how to get more out of him that promises! She had come at last, the one who go a bit of respect for poor folk!\textsuperscript{61}

Her fellow employees saw her as a savior figure who could demand respect and increase their working conditions. This form of shopgirl celibacy is powerful because in other novels by Zola, the women who give in to sexual advances inevitably suffer. Here Denise’s position is strengthened by her celibacy and she enacts change. Because of her kindness and sympathetic heart, Denise accomplishes this—beginning with women’s rights in the store.


\textsuperscript{61} Zola, \textit{Au Bonheur des Dames}, 349-350.
Denise pays special attention to her friend Pauline’s condition and provides the voice for change to protect other women too, with respect to marriage and pregnancy. Because job security was already low for the store employees, it was especially precarious for pregnant employees. Zola describes this difficult situation saying, “The management would not stand for such accidents, maternity was forbidden, on the grounds that it was inconvenient and indecent; at a pinch, marriage might be permitted, but children were forbidden.” Denise is the moral spokeswoman and intercedes on Pauline’s behalf before she is dismissed. Whereas Mouret was too preoccupied to deal with this particular case, Denise forcefully aids Pauline. Zola describes it thus:

Denise had had time to intervene and he silenced Bourdoncle on the ground of the firm’s own interests. Did they want a riot among mothers by upsetting any lady customers who had recently given birth? It was decreed, the most grandiloquent terms, that any married assistant who became pregnant would be entrusted to a special midwife as soon as her presence on the floor might become an outrage to morality. So morality was to be maintained with the marriage status and the health became a higher priority, as well as job security. Pauline, who was married to another employee, could keep her job until it became eminent to retire from the floor and she could return again later. Denise was aware of other women who had miscarried because of long hours on their feet working, as they constrained their stomachs with corsets to avoid showing their growing bellies, valuing their job over their health or the baby. Denise valued the institution of marriage and brought a more fair sense of logic to the store policies. Denise’s promotions caused positive change across the store, but especially for female employees.

These female employees were in a separate class of their own, distinct from the domestic workers, the bourgeois women who shopped at the store, and the women who worked in family businesses and shops. But their place in the social spheres of women and the consumer culture is paramount because they mediate the transaction of goods and are the means for the transmission of style

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid, 351.
64 McBride, “A Woman's World: Department Stores,” 669. “Department store clerks were very different from the largest group of women workers in the late nineteenth century-domestic servants. The young women who came to work in the Parisian grands magasins were recruited from the cities and towns of France, while the domestic servants came from the countryside. Over half (53%) of the female clerks who lived in the Parisian suburbs in 1911 and worked in Parisian stores had been born in Paris. Zola noted that one-third of the Bon Marche's saleswomen were native Parisians and that this was a larger percentage than among the male clerks.” Ibid, 669.
and taste. As Denise first arrives at the store she is intimidated by these women who are in this class apart. Zola describes them,

Mixing daily with the customers, almost all the assistants took on airs and ended up in a indistinct social class, somewhere between the workers and the bourgeoisie; but beneath their skill in dressing, beneath the manners and ways of speaking they had acquired, there was often only a superficial learning, picked up through reading the popular newspapers, from speeches in the theatre and all the nonsense going the rounds on the streets of Paris.65

The shopgirls were not just initiated into the niche class by their new silk dress or their employment that set them above the harder domestic labor. They had to study and observe through interactions and public life of Paris. These shopgirls then blur the lines of the upper class division of wealth with their appearance and know-how in the public eye. This blurring is described in Zola’s novel: “When one encounters them in the street, it is difficult to distinguish them from ambitious petit bourgeois: they wear hats, gloves, and fine boots.”66 This shows the shopgirl is seduced by the dream world and its goods, but also because her social position is ambiguous. Theirs was a job that could provide social mobility “as part of a natural upward progress towards bourgeoisie as their situation improved.”67 As the shop girls progressed upwards, dressing and behaving as their social superiors, the rigid line of the elite becomes less pronounced. The virtuous French woman who perpetuates the taste and style is not just the upper echelons of Parisian high life.

Part of the common misconceptions about the shopgirls that often distract and detract from this idea of her facilitating taste and style are the ideas surrounding the shopgirls’ sexual promiscuity. McBride asserts that the public employment and the shopgirls image are part of the reason they are sexualized:

Social observers in the nineteenth century always felt that female employment offered women too many opportunities for sexual promiscuity. Too many of her contemporaries the department store clerk had a reputation for sexual morality which was at best passable. . . In part the shopgirl was the victim of the role she had to play—an attractive amiable "doll," who was forced to maintain an eternal smile. Whether or not she was sexually promiscuous, the salesgirl's appearance may have seemed so titillating as to inspire tales of debauchery.68

67 Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, 266.
Even instances where shopgirls did take on male companionship in exchange for money because of low starting salaries do not discount the relationship between the shopgirls, the products sold, and the bourgeois women. Denise never allowed herself to be up for sale and wouldn’t succumb to the temptation of money by lowering her morals. But the spiteful tension is there as Zola notes a bourgeois woman’s attitude: “They’re all up for sale, the wretches, like their merchandise.”69 Tensions between salesgirls and classless bourgeoisie women ran high as perhaps they felt the blurring of the social and class lines within the store. Both female and male employees were usually young and single so it “meant that their culture was that of young, urban, single people, whose attitudes and behavior were becoming freer.”70 So perhaps the democratization that came with the class blurring within the shopping world parallels the gray area of what is deemed morally acceptable and good in the public working sphere.

As T.J. Clark suggests, this blurring of class lines came with the Haussmannization of Paris, creating a facade of homogeneity in the inner Paris while the exterior suburbs or the banlieue still maintained a distinctly lower and separate station. Clark argues that the grand magasins fit into the logic of the Haussmannization as they were the signs and instruments of this modernization.71 He describes the myth of modernity saying,

This, is the essential myth of modern life: that the city has become a free field of signs and exhibits, a marketable mass of images, an area in which the old separations have broken down for good. The modern, to repeat the myth once more, is the marginale; it is ambiguity; it is mixture of classes and classification, it is anomie and improvisation, it is the reign of generalized illusion.72 Thus the department store and its wares perpetuated this mixture of classes and classification. Class could not be determined visually by clothing or by location in the city. Employees and workers start to blend in, moving socially upwards, as the upper class line is blurred. As this social line disintegrates, the moral lines are likewise confounded as what would have previously been deemed ‘lower or working class

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72 Ibid, 49.
behavior”73 becomes more generalized and widely acceptable. As he examines Edouard Manet’s painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), Clark suggests that some representations of the blurring of class lines “suggest the unease and duplicity involved in attaining to a new class.”74 This discomfort is seen as the Paradise employees interact with patrons and prejudiced class assumptions are expressed; however, Zola’s overall characterization of the blurring of class lines is in the positive as the new sense of modernity is established via the department store and its employees.

Department store employees act as facilitators for the new modern consumer culture that invited and perhaps negatively connoted sexualized views of the female employees, but women in this work space were crucial to the system. Each salesclerk, regardless of department or gender, helped “to create an atmosphere of attention and service while the merchandise ‘sold itself.’”75 This attention and service is important for perpetuating the department store ‘dream world’ illusion as the employees support and fan the flames of seductive consumption and persuasive spending habits. Eventually this space becomes even more heavily influenced by women:

Women were a crucial element in this system. In fact, although women did not form the majority of the stores' work force until after 1914, women dominated certain departments and came to symbolize the "world of women," as the department store was described. Women were both the clerks and the customers in this market place, for the mainstays of the new stores were fashions and dry goods. Women were scarcely new to commerce, but their role was expanding and changing in the late nineteenth century.76

Zola establishes an early conversation about this system, highlighting the ideal in Denise and the ills associated with the department store. But from the 1880s forward, women, especially in the department store, dominate the consumer process. Recognizing the various facets of the modern consumer and how it changed across the late 19th-century and early twentieth century gives a deeper understanding to cultural history.

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73 Ibid, 220. Some of these lower class qualities could include: “disabused tolerance, sexual hardheadedness, lack of false modesty, simple high spirits, outright salaciousness…”
74 Ibid, 205.
76 Ibid, 666.
Zola seemingly modeled the relationship between Mouret and Denise on real relationships within the department store world, showing that Denise and *La Parisienne* could be mobile within society. McBride notes the common occurrence of marriages like this historically saying,

"During the 1880s, when the city of Paris gathered data on marriages, the percentage of female clerks who married male employees was between 45 and 50 per cent. The intermarriage of clerks was the result of their associations at work and also of their desire for a respectable life."  

Mouret and Denise could have been modeled after Boucicaut, the director at the Bon Marché, who married one of his shop assistants. After the director’s death, Madame Boucicaut ran the store herself, actively arranging for social security and leisure activities for the employees, showing that women could have meaningful and important part within the business of department stores. Other examples of store owning men marrying their shopgirls include H.A. Chauchard and Ernest Cognacq, from the Louvre and Samaritaine department stores, respectively. This could be seen as a smart career move for a man to marry a woman who understands the inner workings of the store and seeks similar capitalistic goals. At one point in the novel, Mouret even daydreams about this kind of relationship with Denise. These daydreams consist of Denise by Mouret’s side in every step of the day—through financial paperwork, meetings, hosting visitors, working with investors, bankers, manufactures, and deciding success or failure of the firm. Mouret imagines Denise with him as co-president assisting and guiding him. Though we don’t see this unfold in the story completely, we can begin to see the power that Denise has within the store and how she makes positive changes.

These relationships show the plausibility of the situation, but Zola’s literary style still retains a fairytale-type ending where everything works out splendidly. This makes Denise appear as more of an exceptional and ideal woman to survive the consumptive powers of the store and gracefully move into marriage to a wealthy man. Because Mouret has had so many liaisons with store employees, his reputation is tainted but it does not ruin him as a viable option for husband in the end. Denise retains her

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77 Ibid, 682.
79 Ibid.
81 Buss, Introduction to *Au Bonheur Des Dames*, xviii.
virtue and would rather leave her job than damage her reputation in out-of-wedlock relations. This separation from the other working class girls makes Denise an ideal in Zola’s depictions of society. She is not seduced by the store and goods, Mouret, or by the lure of financial security through prostitution. Upon her return to the store, her reputation and pay are greatly increased and her troubles seem to melt away in an inexplicable Cinderella storybook way.

Denise and the two women portrayed in Tissot’s painting represent the empowered La Parisienne in the workplace. The two women in the boutique are fashionable, helpful, pleasant, and direct as they fulfill their work responsibilities. Like Denise, who does not succumb to sexual advances or discrimination based on gender or class, Tissot’s shopgirls are not distracted or seduced by a leering man outside the window or by wealthy clientele who may try to intimidate. Though the boutique would have a smaller influence in Paris compared to the department stores, the individual interactions between a shopgirl and the clientele remain just as potent. The shopgirls themselves represent the fashion trends and La Parisienne personna. They are knowledgeable about their wares, how to model them, and how to assist the clientele in selecting their purchases. These women maneuver the social atmosphere of the fashion world because they are instrumental in promoting and selling the products that define it. This position gives the shopgirl a unique and powerful position separate from other men and women of the day.

**Tissot’s Shopgirl**

James Tissot’s *Femme à Paris* series (1883-1885) is a grand-scale fifteen image series showing the various sides of the modern Parisian woman. The series exhibited in Paris at Le Galerie Sedelmeyer in 1885 and again in 1886 at the Arthur Tooth Gallery in London, with intent to capture the elusive definition of the women of Paris. Besides the *Demoiselle de Magasin* (figure 1), showing a shopgirl in a Parisian boutique, the series hosted paintings with women at the circus, the opera, social climbing parties, music lessons, walking the parks of Paris and so on (figures 2-8). Unfortunately the *Femme à Paris* series

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was not received well when shown Paris. Criticism of the series came because of the supposed English influence in the paintings, the figures wore slightly-dated clothing and seemed un-French and banal. Tissot’s intended to have short stories written by contemporary authors to accompany each painting. He planned for Emile Zola to write about the Demoiselle de Magasin since he “had established himself as literary authority on women, shopping and department stores.” These stories from various authors were never written, probably because of the exhibition’s bad reviews. But despite the lack of success in his current day, Tissot’s work has been praised by contemporary scholars for its remarkable ability to artfully embrace Charles Baudelaire’s admonition to paint modern life. To capture the complete story of the iconic Parisienne is very bold, but this iconic woman was a common theme in Impressionist art. Tissot had long been friends with Impressionist artists James McNeill Whistler and Edgar Degas, and was invited and encouraged to be part of exhibitions with the Impressionist group.

Parisiens did not like Tissot’s versions for whatever reasons, but regardless, they were inundated with examples of La Parisienne. Tissot’s La Parisienne expands the definition to include various settings and even classes, so this figure was represented as a working girl, as well as a bourgeois woman. Perhaps the French upper-class attending the art shows were uncomfortable admitting that the definition of La Parisienne had expanded to a class beyond the bourgeois? Or maybe male art critics were harsher in their criticism on this seemingly ‘woman positive’ series, realizing the power of women was growing in modern society. Tissot has been oft forgotten in the mix of so many successful artists of his time, but his view of women in this series is particularly empowering because it shows the many roles available to women.

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83 Marshall, James Tissot Victorian Life Modern Love, 147. The exhibition is described as: “exhibited in English fashion under glass, created a collective impression of brightness, loud color, and modernity. Critics were puzzled by the odd mannerist elongation of the bodies and Tissot’s looser, brushier style as he moved away from his former tightness in handling. Parisian reviewers frequently rejected the project as un-French: a common joke was that the figures were actually “l’Anglais à Paris.” English writers too were disturbed by the exhibition calling it a popular picture show and likening it to entertainment as opposed to art.” Ibid, 147.
84 Ibid, 154
87 Marshall, James Tissot Victorian Life Modern Love, 147. “The Parisienne was a personification of the city itself...repeated so often that it became an accepted fact, the notion that parisional females were somehow a race apart, requiring categorization and interpretation, spurred countless representations of the figure in high and low art.” Ibid, 147. See all figures included.
Even though Tissot has been extensively analyzed by art historians, scholarship about his works, particularly that on the *Femme à Paris* series, does not present a complete story. Michael Levey and Tamar Garb have each offered their criticism and analyses; regrettably, their views are problematic in an overly simplistic characterization of the women portrayed. While discussing the Tissot’s ouvre, Levey condescendingly writes of the disturbing and ambiguous nature of women in Tissot’s work. He interprets Tissot’s paintings, remarking:

> At first glance many of his paintings have a mere fashion-plate charm...and undemanding enjoyable as are the resulting paintings, it would be wrong to assume there is little more to his art. For all its patent charm and its mild hints of social humor and flirtation, it has underneath remarkably disturbing elements, with a nearly obsessive mood compounded of languor and isolation and sheer yearning. Women are, from first to last, the carriers of this mood, experience it as well as causing it, its victims as well as its propagators. They are weak, yet appealing in their weakness, whether genuinely weakened by ill-health or by the social convention that requires them to seek a man’s steadying hand...  

First, fashion plates should not be brushed off as merely charming pictures. They are viable representations of visual and material culture because they were actively circulated and published as trend-setting reference guides, artistic expression and advertising products. Also, an artist’s work should not be so generally characterized, unless it is truly fitting of the works. Some of Tissot’s earlier images of his wife Kathleen Newton showed a very sick woman dying of consumption, and perhaps illustrate this weakened state. Be that as it may, Levey’s statements about languor, sheer yearning, weakness and an obsessive mood are not apt descriptions for Tissot’s *Femme à Paris* series, or for women in general. Unabashedly, Levey continues his grossly overgeneralizing derision using phrases such as: “they and their pretty plumage must be protected,” “these fragile creatures,” “cast a potent spell over men but seem often to do so half against their own will,” “how bored they are with their role.” All of these phrases are similarly problematic for an overarching summary of Tissot’s work, and especially for *Femme à Paris* series, and most specifically for *Demoiselle de Magasin*. These descriptors taint his essay and give a

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90 Iskin, *Modern Women*, pp. 198-211, repeatedly applies fashion plates in comparison to paintings and posters. Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market*, pp. 139-141 also asserts the importance of fashion plates as important art historical primary sources.
prejudicial slant to Tissot’s vibrant work. Levey’s statements are misogynistic criticism, applying diminutive and incorrect characterizations to Tissot’s representations.

Tamar Garb’s essay on James Tissot’s *Femme à Paris* series is an especially useful piece in discussing the entirety of this series in terms of gender, despite her troublesome analyses. *La Parisienne* became a marketable commodity and her display of gendered expectations and subjections of the day is apparent in the various representations. Her approach in this essay is partially socio-historical which sounds feminist, but then she retreats (similar to many Tissot scholars), to dismissive and overly sexualized terms. She discusses the power of the male gaze in the various paintings that she sees as framing the represented women as weak, seeking a male counterpart, and not able to express control of her life and body as the Parisian woman. Garb asserts:

> All of Tissot’s *Femme à Paris* are visibly haunted by a male presence. Not only they themselves the product of male fantasy, both Tissot’s and the numerous writers and image-makers to his heir, but they are physically surrounded by the men to whom they are accountable and on whom they are dependent. Whether dressed up as *The Fashionable Beauty* or undressed, as in the *The Acrobat* as the lowly tight-rope walker, the least elevated of contemporary performing artists, women tightly held in by leotards or corsets, are watched surrounded and admired by what is predominately a chorus of men.92

Here Garb references two of Tissot’s images that I believe show the diversity of *La Parisienne*. I disagree with her belittling assessments of these figures. I see these women as boldly entering the public eye in their various activities, and doing so with grace, poise, talent and self-confidence. These women can command attention in whatever arena they choose to perform their gender. The other paintings of the series show women with direct gazes at the viewer who do not match with this dependent and weak characterization. *L’Ambitieuse* (figure 2) shows a woman who commands the room as she enters, confident in her role, even if she is in fact, a social climber. In *Amateur de Circus* (figure 3), the modern women sit front row to the circus performance, comfortable in a public space, at ease with their position. *Sans Dot* (figure 4) shows a young woman with her guardian, young but elegantly sure of herself in the parks of the city. *Demoiselles d’Artists* (figure 5) likewise turn amid their activity to look directly at the viewer as they assuredly participate in the celebratory public luncheon outside a museum. Despite Garb’s

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derogatory comments towards the women in these images, this is one of the few pieces to talk about all fifteen images of this series in a broader social context of fin-de-siécle modernism with attention to gender.

Both Levey and Garb fail to give more social significance to the shopgirl, each reducing Tissot’s paintings to the common sexualized and misogynistic overtones that are frequent in discussions about late nineteenth-century French women. Because there have not been many images of shopgirls or of the department store,93 and because so much of this scholarship echoes the problematic sexualization, recent feminist art historians have increasingly sought to clarify and illuminate this gap. Edgar Degas’s millinery paintings are some good examples of shopgirl imagery that correlated to Tissot’s efforts. By examining Tissot’s *Demoiselle de Magasin* in relation to Zola’s Denise character, Degas’s millinery images and other posters, we can see how the subject of the shopgirl creates ambiguity in class and sexuality, allowing for these women to be part of *La Parisienne*.

Tissot’s *Demoiselle de Magasin* (figure 1) is large-scale pastel painting offering a view of a fashionable Parisian boutique, staffed by two fashionable women. Painted with a wide angle, using a raking perspective,94 the viewer becomes the customer who is welcomed in by a sleek door. The main subject, the shopgirl, opens the door facing the viewer with a direct gaze, holding a parcel in her hand. She is neither confrontational, overly seductive or happy, just a simple pleasant look, but a direct gaze nonetheless. Other gazes bounce around in the background as the other shopgirl looks over her shoulder to a man who is obviously peering, even leering, through the shop window. He presumably is looking at the women, not at the store’s wares. Ribbons and dress trimmings casually pile up on the tables in soft feminine pinks and laces. Tissot includes various fabrics and textures with detail and precision.

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93 See footnote 4, D’Souza, “Impressionist Department Store,” 136. In describing why the department store was not painted D’Souza says “the answer has to do not with the reality (architectural, commercial, social) of that space—how it was built or how it was used- but rather with how its use was coded, what could be admitted as to its use. The department store and the mix of commerce and sexuality which it came to represent was not simply something that Impressionism happened not to see, but rather something that that mode of painting, organized as it was around the flaneurs gaze, could not be seen to see: could not picture, in other words.” Ibid, 137.

This kind of boutique would be called a haberdashery—a store devoted to small accessories including lace, ribbons, buttons and trimmings—ostensibly a woman’s store. Women selling to women echos the role that Denise played at The Paradise. Since men would not frequent a boutique like this, the male artist’s gaze and the viewer’s gaze is complicated because the shopgirl holds the door open for a customer, presumably a woman. Since much of the scholarship purports that Tissot is upholding an ‘eroticized notion of the shopgirl,’ D’Souza addresses this conundrum of gazes saying “that the viewer/departing customer is conceived within the painting to be a woman, in which case the signs of sexual invitation embodied in the saleswoman would seem inexplicable.” Tissot’s shopgirl here is looking directly at the viewer, which in other paintings signals a sexual forwardness and invitation, but this painting does more to undercut the notion of the overt sexuality of shopgirls.

Tissot painted a freeze-frame shot of modernity with carefully placed people and objects to create stories. The identities of the women are uncertain, but as part of the Femme à Paris series we see them as one facet of the definition of the women of Paris. The men frozen between window panes gaze intently at the other respective women. This slice of modernity shows the bustle of the streets—complete with a flâneur saluting the woman in the hat with red lace, a leering bearded gentleman intent upon the other shopgirl, another man standing in the street, carefully posed horses heads as they drive carriages, and slight glimpses at the neighboring shops. Tissot humorously includes a clever visual pun with the bearded man peering inside—he is emasculated by the placement of a display mannequin in a tight-waisted corset sits in the window obscuring his torso. Inside the shop, the stillness of the shot and haphazard objects are likewise carefully rendered. The pile of ribbons on the table are a soft pink, emphasizing the femininity of the store, and yet they are a tangled mess—with one strand of ribbon reaching to the floor in a way that invites the customer to touch. A store like this would a fairly tactile experience, appealing to

95 Clayson, Painted Love, 124, and D’Souza, “Impressionist Department Store,” 134.
96 Clayson, Painted Love, 125.
97 D’Souza, “Impressionist Department Store,” 134.
touch and visual appeal.\textsuperscript{100} The two chairs are facing different angles showing that they were hastily moved and that the busy nature of the store is focused on the customers, not on straightening the products and furniture. This documentary style perspective is too perfect to be real. The way the faces, products and outside objects line up is uncanny, even staged. Even though modern contemporary painters would paint this style from life,\textsuperscript{101} this could not be Tissot’s personal experience because of the female intended customers and because of the overly precise location of the figures into story-telling placement.

Scholars refer to Tissot’s choice to paint the shopgirl as evidence of his awareness of the supposed ‘suspicious professions,’\textsuperscript{102} where women’s work in a shop is connoted with sexual availability,\textsuperscript{103} but \textit{Demoiselle de Magasin} shows an empowerment of the shopgirl and perhaps the same kind of withholding that we see with Denise Baudu’s character. In Degas’s millinery paintings there is a similar attention to the women in a boutique, but like Tissot, the supposed promiscuity of the workers is undercut by the story and the products, showing a blurring of class lines and a haziness of meaning. Degas’ extensive millinery paintings all avoid overt sexualization of the modiste or shopgirl, where she would usually be considered a “tarte” and the shopgirl is elevated to an ambiguous class, and perhaps, even seen as an artist.\textsuperscript{104} Eunice Lipton credits this desexualization of the profession in Degas’s paintings as an attempt to show the obscure and changing position of the shopgirl within society.\textsuperscript{105} Iskin likewise pushes the paintings interpretations further into fashion consumptive practices, moving away from the sexualized interpretations.\textsuperscript{106}

In the four Degas millinery paintings included here we can see the unclear class division between the shopgirl and the bourgeois shopper, the lack of sexualization of the shopgirl, and an emphasis on the craft and artistry of hat-making. In Degas \textit{Little Milliners} of 1882 (figure 13), two modistes hold their

\textsuperscript{100} Zola repeatedly references the sensuality of The Paradise’s products but in doing so demonizes the shoppers as uncontrollable because of the visual and tactile stimulus. Iskin speaks to zola’s manipulations to seduce women. Iskin, \textit{Modern Woman}, 79.

\textsuperscript{101} Clayson, \textit{Painted Love}, 124. Tissot applies an adaptation of the cutoff, casually glimpsed modern-life picture invented and elaborated by Degas, Renoir, Manet, Morisot and Caillebotte.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, 130-131.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, \textit{Painted Love}, 125 “Tissot used a clearly articulated story- that of eroticized commerce in the Parisian shop.”

\textsuperscript{104} Eunice Lipton, \textit{Looking into Degas} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 130, 152-153.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 152, “Degas painted them in such a way as to minimize, even undercut, their immorality; his neutralizing of sexual content is precisely what was happening socially. Assertive and ambiguous sexual behavior among women had become more universal, cutting across class lines, and therefore was becoming ordinary.”

\textsuperscript{106} Iskin, \textit{Modern Woman}, 79
creations, focused and unconcerned with a viewer. Unlike Tissot’s painting where there are aggressive and suggestive male gazes, these women are unseen by a prying male gaze. Once again this shop would be a female-only type of store. Degas may have frequented it to try and paint the scene, but the space would not be open to the flâneur artist of the day. Here we can begin to see Degas “disrupting the expectation of her sexual availability” as the modiste has an increased independence from the viewer in the gazes and focus on the hats. In Degas’s 1881 *At the Milliner* (figure 14), the cloudiness of class lines is further emphasized. Here there are two women seated in the millinery shop, one helping the other adjust her hat. The woman on the right, wearing the hat, is perhaps the bourgeois shopper. The woman on the left is helping with the adjustments could be the modiste. The shopgirls would not wear a hat unless modeling it for a customer. It was not uncommon for a modiste to wear gloves, similar to that worn by upper-class women. Such an elaborate lace collar would not be the norm for a work uniform. Also, it would be unusual for a modiste to sit down on the benches with a customer. So who is the customer and who is a worker? It could be two modistes—one helping the other model a hat, or two customers—one is just currently hatless as she assists her friend. With their backs turned and at least half of their faces obscured, occupied in their activity, these women are not available for visual consumption or interested in interaction and thus they become non-sexual to the viewer.

In Degas’s *The Millinery Shop* of 1884 (figure 15) the lone modiste is upstaged by the hat display, while exuding an air of sophistication. This woman also wears gloves and these longer elbow-length gloves were more likely wore by customers. This woman shows the same “relatively imprecise class signifiers found in other pictures from this group: her aristocratic air may derive from the fact that in at least two pastel preparatory sketches, she is shown to be hatted client examining a potential purchase.” Degas was clearly toying with the characterization of the figure whether she would be shown as one class or another. Because of this indecision, or the switch, the figure has an “aristocratic

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107 Lipton, *Looking into Degas*, 163.
108 D’Souza, “Impressionist Department Store,” writes that “while wrist-length gloves were commonly worn by milliners, the elbow-length gloves on this figure were more likely to be found on customers,” Ibid 131.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
air,”, or her composure and facial expression suggests a savoir-faire. This echoes my argument about the shopgirl as part of the definition of *La Parisienne*, as the shopgirl applied the persona of upper-class women.\(^{111}\) This modiste is also dissuading attention with any gaze or attention to a viewer, as she is fully immersed in her work. In Degas’s 1883 *At the Milliner’s* (figure 16) another duo is shown with even more attention to the hats than the figures. Their bodies are also angled away from the viewer, blocked by the table of hats, with the figure on the left completely obscured with her back turned.\(^{112}\) The woman on the right adjusting the hat is the more curious as she too could be a modiste acting as model for the customer or she is a shopper trying on a hat with her friend. The closeness of the uniform to fashionable clothing of the day and the loose brushwork makes for an unfocused and socially debatable position for the women. These four images show another contemporary artist’s view of the women of Paris who worked in these specialized boutiques. Degas’s images remove an male presence and offer more of the ambiguity of class distinctions. These images show women who take their work seriously and showcase the beautiful products displayed.

With Tissot’s *Demoiselle de Magasin* there are several commonalities between Degas’s milliners, Denise Baudu’s character and with other poster images. Tissot’s shopgirl(s) appear to be single young women, wearing the typical fashionable black silk outfit of a shopgirl, who are proficient, if not excellent, at their work. They take their job seriously, as they are intent on the products and the customer. In the London catalog exhibition the *Demoiselle de Magasin* is described as follows:

> It is on the boulevard; a scene full of life and movement is passing out of doors and out young lady with her engaging smile is holding open the door till her customer takes the pile of purchases from her hand and passes into the carriage. She knows her business and has learned the first lesson of all, that her duty is to be polite, winning and pleasant. Where she means what she says, or much of what her looks express, is not the question; enough if she has a smile and an appropriate answer for everybody.\(^{113}\)

The figure does have an engaging facial expression and a look of comfortable savoir-faire. She knows her audience/customer so she can learn and behave more upper-class. It is her duty to be “polite, winning and

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\(^{111}\) Lipton, *Looking into Degas*, 153. “The milliner in particular— unlike the laundress and most other working- class women— had a middle-class patina, for she relished and mimed the gestures and attitudes of the middle class women she served.” Ibid, 153.

\(^{112}\) Ibid, 162

pleasant,” which would make sense for any customer service position, especially when serving patrons who are above one’s class. The interesting part in the description is the last line—implying that the shopgirl knows what to say and how to express herself in a pleasing way to everyone she encounters. This could imply that she gets on well with the female bourgeois clientele or the men that may try to approach here. Or perhaps this shopgirl is very similar to Denise in her stories and is confidently sure of herself in the shop.

Here I offer an interpretation of Demoiselle de Magasin that has not been addressed before. Recall that Tissot planned for Zola to write an accompanying short story for the painting— Tissot would have been familiar with the popular novel and the subject matter or he would not suggest Zola as the author to accompany this work.114 Possibly the three women shown in the painting are in fact the same woman, show in frozen, yet multi-faceted vignettes. The figure on the left is being leered at by a bearded man. Because of their financial instability, many shopgirls, laundresses, and domestic workers had to supplement their meager incomes with sexual favors in exchange for money.115 They were not outright prostitutes, but they were not as ideal and strong as Denise in resisting the lure of security through sex. Perhaps the figure on the left recognized the pull from this option but chose not to succumb, much like Denise. She saw the effects of this with other shopgirls and chose to remain celibate, which made herself that much more powerful when solicited by Mouret. This withholding of sexuality for the time being gives Denise more cards to play later in the novel. So the figure on the left notices the leering man but takes no heed to his advances. What if that same woman in the painting, who appears to blend up in class at her work, also is approached by a younger, more wealthy flâneur in the streets, as seen in background of the painting (with the woman in a black hat being saluted by a gentleman in a top hat)? Maybe she has truly learned how to dress and act like a bourgeois woman, become as La Parisienne, and even applied her skills from work in her red ribboned accessories. What if that same girl refuses the flâneur’s advances

115 Lipton, Looking into Degas, 152. “They lived in unstable financial situation which frequently put then in the position of needing men to pay for their entertainment, clothing, housing, and so on. Frequently, this was a matter of exchanging personal - usual sexual favors for occasional support.”
in hopes of securing a better future life as a wife and mother, while also having ambition and drive with her career too? That same shopgirl could be very proud of her work and confidently invites customers in and out of the shop by looking at them directly, as seen with the main figure to the right. If we look at the painting as a simplified drama of Denise’s life, the Demoiselle de Magasin becomes much more powerful as she sees the possibilities in her life of work and chooses the more professional and moral route.

Unlike Degas’s paintings where there are no men present, thus no male gazes in the work, Tissot’s Demoiselle de Magasin attaches meaning to these gazes. The word for window shopping in French, lèche-vitrine, (lick window) has immediate sexual connotations, so the ogling of the shopgirl on the left from outside the window and the snake-like carving on the counter table leg, with his tongue lewdly protruding, unfortunately brings out further sexualization of this shopgirl figure. Garb addresses the conflation of sex and shopping saying:

“Lèche-vitrine: consumption of goods and consumption of bodies amounts to the same thing here...For Tissot, more important than the desired look of the female commodity fetishized is the lecherous looking which is directed at women themselves.”

The lecherous-looking is uncomfortable when it’s an unwanted (male) gaze rather than the customer’s—the virtuous French bourgeois women who took fashion home and perpetuated the iconic taste and aesthetic. In many of the Femme à Paris series the main figure looks directly at the viewer. Scholarship around these other paintings does not condemn these women as loose or fallen women simply because of their gazes. The shopgirl should not be reduced to that either, just because she is a working professional, looking directly at the viewer. Another poster showing a shopgirl and patron captures this sentiment—it’s not about sexualization of products and women, or a fetishized losing of your mind as you shop.

Henri Thiriet’s Exposition de Blanc a la Place Clichy (1898) (figure 17) is a poster showing the dream worlds of the department store and yet capturing the sophistication of La Parisienne, as displayed by someone like Denise. The two women wear very similar dress, with the shopgirl’s dress being black and more plain than her bourgeois patron. The patron sits contemplatively examining the luscious fabrics while the shopgirl intently helps her. The bourgeois figure on the left wears a hat and pin demonstrating

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her class distinction but besides these indicators there is little by way of clothing, hair, demeanor or facial expression that shows one woman to be above the other. The shopgirl seems to know her audience and is trying hard to impress, in hopes of raising her station by learning to be as La Parisienne — her pinky finger is raised to connote elegance and class as she displays the fabrics. This careful and thoughtful moment illustrates the beauty and colors of the department store dream world with bright colors and flowing lines as the fabric seems to billow around the figures. But it also depicts a seriousness to the shopping experience, much different that the orgasmic frenzy that Zola and accompanying scholars reference. Neither the shopgirl or the patron are sexualized or invite that kind of interpretation. This image is on par with Degas’s paintings showing a blurring of class lines and a craftsmanship element as the shopgirl sells the persona and the fabric/clothing of La Parisienne.

Denise, Tissot’s shopgirls, Degas’s millinery modistes and Thiriet’s poster shopgirl represent the empowered La Parisienne in the workplace. Tissot’s figures in boutique are fashionable, helpful, pleasant and direct as they fulfill their work responsibilities. Like Denise, who does not succumb to sexual advances or discrimination based on gender or class, Tissot’s shopgirls are not distracted or seduced by a leering man outside the window, wealthy gentlemen in the street, or by wealthy clientele who may try to intimidate. Though the boutique would have a smaller influence in Paris compared to the department stores, the individual interactions between a shopgirl and clientele remain just as potent as the class lines become less distinct and the craft (as seen in Degas’s paintings) or persona of the La Parisienne is made more apparent with the shopgirls. They are knowledgeable about their wares, how to model them and how to assist the clientele in selecting their purchases. These women maneuver the social atmosphere of the fashion world because they are instrumental in promoting and selling the products that define it. This position gives the shopgirl a unique and powerful position separate from other men and women of the day.
Conclusion

This thesis offers a case study of primary examples showing how the shopgirl is part of the iconic *La Parisienne*. The gaps in the scholarship around Tissot’s *La Femme à Paris* series and Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* indicate that first, women have been marginalized and oversexualized in the historical landscape of department stores and late nineteenth century French consumer economy, and second, the shopgirl personna has not been given sufficient credit for a role in that economy. By examining works like these, we can perhaps better understand how various women shaped culture, fashion, and a modern definition of femininity.

The dream world of the department store shows the erotic side of consumption—undermining women’s positions and roles, while reducing them to another product to be bought. Scholarship around the department store shows the detrimental effects of the power of shopping with hysterical and neurotic consumption of goods. The overemphasis on the sexual nature of women diminishes the power they possessed in society. But even if an individual was “undone” morally by these dazzling goods, the icon of *La Parisienne* transcends these follies. As a whole, the French bourgeois shopping women brought home products for the good of the virtuous French republican home—acting as an emissary for the home and nation. Recent feminist scholarship begins to address parts of this history, giving a much needed space for women’s agency.

*La Parisienne* transcends some of the more negative and sexualized connotations about the mass consumer culture of late nineteenth-century Paris. Every woman in Paris wanted to be in the image of *La Parisienne*, as she was the ideal complete package of fashion, taste, confidence, and beauty. Tissot recognizes the power of this image and seek to capture the illusive power of this kind of woman. *La Demoiselle de Magasin* shows Tissot had a broader definition of *La Parisienne*. He paints a working girl as part of that ideal icon, giving a positive view of women in the workplace. Tissot’s perspective here shows that *La Parisienne* blurs class and economic lines as she exercises agency in the public sphere.
Likewise, Zola gives a framework for showing *La Parisienne* as an inclusive category where shopgirls—the working modern woman—can be part of this special class of Parisian women. The shopgirls were perhaps the most powerful liminal figures in the whole department store consumer world. Denise is the exceptional ideal that Zola empowers as part of this category of women. The shopgirls are the means by which bourgeois women take home their moralizing products. In order to be successful, the shopgirls are live models of the products and personality at all times. Because Denise rises through the ranks and successfully adopts the persona of *La Parisienne*, she is able to sell more effectively. The bourgeois shoppers respect her more as she fits in as a woman of Paris. More importantly, Mouret and the fellow employees respect her and value her as more than a sexual commodity, so she rises to leadership and effects changes. These changes directly benefit women and children in the department store. Her ability to transcend and develop shows that the iconic *La Parisienne* is a more flexible category, open to more modern women, than previously shown.

These insights on Tissot and Zola show that the shopgirl is a sort of fashion world heroine. They are powerful as the medium between the male department store owner, individual boutique owners, designers and drapers to promote fashion to the bourgeois women. Shopgirls sell, style, perhaps even design and market this style—the iconic French fashion brand—that the entire world tries to mimic. As facilitators in a distinct cultural space, the shopgirls become a compelling class of their own, with agency that is separate, yet similar, to other women who encompass the qualities of *La Parisienne*. Because French fashion sense is still highly valued today, we can only begin to see the contribution of nineteenth century shopgirls in their liminal cultural space of the fashion world.
FIGURES

Figure 1 James Tissot, *La Demoiselle de Magasin (The Young Lady of the Shop or The Shopgirl)*, 1883–1885, Oil on canvas, Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada
Figure 2 James Tissot, *L’Ambitieuse (The Political Woman)* 1883-1885, Oil on canvas, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York

Figure 3 James Tissot, *Amateur Circus (The Circus Lover)*, 1885, Oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts
Figure 4 James Tissot, *Sans Dot (Without Dowry)*, 1883-1885, Oil on canvas, Private Collection

Figure 5 James Tissot, *Les Femmes d’artiste (The Artists’ Ladies)*, 1885, Oil on canvas, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia
Figure 6 James Tissot, *La Demoiselle d’honneur (The Bridesmaid 1883-85)*, Oil on canvas, Leeds City Art Gallery, U.K.

Figure 7 James Tissot, *La Mondaine (The Woman of Fashion)*, 1883-1885, Oil on canvas, Private Collection
Figure 8 James Tissot, *Ces Dames des Chars (The Ladies of the Chariots)*, 1883-85, Oil on canvas, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence.

Figure 9 Jules Chéret, *Aux Buttes Chaumont, robes, manteaux, modes*, 1882, color lithograph, Chaix, Paris.
Figure 10 Fernand Fau, *14e Exposition, — 31 rue Bonaparte, Salon des 100*, 1895, color lithograph, Chamerot et Renouard, Paris.

Figure 12  Photo of Print Illustration of 1900 World Exhibition Statue “La Parisienne,” Item number: #242072351, Print post card sold on delcampe.net 20 December 2013

Figure 13 Edgar Degas, *Little Milliners*, 1882, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City
Figure 14 Edgar Degas, *At the Milliner's*, 1881, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 15 Edgar Degas, *The Millinery Shop*, 1884, Art Institute of Chicago
Figure 16 Edgar Degas, *At the Milliner's*, 1883, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

Figure 17 Henri Thiriet, *Exposition de Blanc a la Place Clichy*, 1898, color lithograph


