

Debuting in the Salon of 1882, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (figure 1) was Édouard Manet's last major work. The painting features a barmaid positioned behind a counter surrounded by bottles of beer and liquor and an active crowd reflected in the large mirror behind her. Characteristically for Manet, the painting was met with confusion from critics and viewers upon its debut. Critics did not know how to read the barmaid, the prominent main figure with a blank, outward gaze that did not easily contribute to a narrative.<sup>1</sup> Manet's paintings were known for this lack of clear narrative, as well as an unconventional subject of working or lower class women, not notable or recognizable enough to be given the portraiture treatment front and center of the canvas.

*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* can be read as a cultural analysis of commodity and consumption in newly modernized Paris.<sup>2</sup> With the barmaid as the focus of this contemporary scene, we can study how modernization led to changes in traditional gender and class roles, as well as the relationship working class women had with consumer culture that defined the era. Shop girls were modern and stylish, not only selling goods to customers but participating in consumer culture themselves. Additionally, the attempt to regulate prostitution led to the emergence of the brasseries à femmes, a boom of drinking establishments where servers were often prostitutes who masqueraded among the masses and interacted with the crowd.<sup>3</sup> These women sold intimate encounters that provided more than animalistic sexual gratification, especially at the higher-end venues such as the Folies-Bergère, where the working class and bourgeois mixed for drinking, socializing, and theatrical entertainment.<sup>4</sup> These ladies offered conversation, companionship, and seduction, all part of the spectacle that helped to define the café-concert experience.<sup>5</sup>

Extensive literature exists on *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. As with many of Manet's paintings, critical discourse yields a popular consensus that the figure illustrates feelings of increased alienation in a rapidly changing, fast moving society. Feminist scholars have also explored the social and cultural implications of the figure to analyze her role as a representation of commodity during a period of rapidly increasing capitalism. It is in the context of this cultural framework that I will argue that the barmaid is a study of commodity in three ways: as a participant, an advertising device, and likely, a prostitute.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, under Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's regime, Baron Georges-Eugene Haussmann embarked on a reconstruction program of Paris transforming the narrow, medieval streets to wide boulevards and public spaces resulting in a city that encouraged walking and exploration.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this major shift to the city's construction, the emergence of new, commercial spaces followed, including the department store and concert hall, normalizing women's presence as a participant in consumer culture as well as offering women new employment opportunities. The department store was full of goods marketed to women and attracted a largely female clientele. The café-concert was a "glorified beer hall," a modern creation of Baron Haussmann's that "grew fat in the free market for eating and drinking which boomed on the boulevards in the late 1860s."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Albert Biome, "Manet's 'Un Bar Aux Folies-Bergère' as an Allegory of Nostalgia," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 56, no. 2 (1993): 240.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth E. Iskin, "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère," *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (1995): 25.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Israeall Ross, "Serving Sex: Playing with Prostitution in the 'Brasseries à Femmes' of Late Nineteenth-Century Paris," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 2 (2015): 312.

<sup>4</sup> Gerry Harris, "Regarding History: Some Narratives concerning the Café-Concert, Le Music Hall, and the Feminist Academic," *TDR* (1988-) 40, no. 4 (Winter, 1996): 72.

<sup>5</sup> Iskin, *Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Forgione, "Art of Walking in Late-Nineteenth-Century Paris," *The Art Bulletin* 87, no. 4 (2005): 664.

<sup>7</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 340.

While classes mixed in these public environments, both were designed to offer a new modern experience combining glamor and spectacle with public, consumer transactions.<sup>8</sup> Founded in 1869, The Folies-Bergère was such a space, as Boime states, that grew from a small scale enterprise into a mass consumption empire through the deployment of the latest marketing and advertising strategies.<sup>9</sup> It was undeniable that these latest strategies included women, both as a new demographic as well as a selling device. The visibility of women in visual representations of the period indicate women were embracing the public spaces of the new city and they were often depicted, as Iskin states, promenading, stopping for coffee, visiting department stores and exhibitions, and depending on their class, serving customers.<sup>10</sup>

At its core, *A Bar at Folies-Bergère* features a female employee who is positioned to serve customers. She would be considered conventionally attractive to the nineteenth century viewer and dressed in modern, fashionable attire, purchasing the modern goods and apparel required to keep on trend. Critics often referred to the barmaid as “la marchande,” or the salesgirl, an emerging class of the petite bourgeoisie, who presented themselves as modern and fashionable to attract upscale clientele.<sup>11</sup> Although these ladies were not members of proper bourgeois society, they fell somewhere in between the working and middle class, assimilating to and attracting the bourgeois through daily interactions on the job.<sup>12</sup> They were part of the emerging demographic targeted by department stores as well as the spectacle that began to define establishments such as Folies-Bergère. Described by Clark, this class of women was a defining example of the “make-believe and uncertainty in modern life, especially in matters of social class.”<sup>13</sup>

Around the time of the painting’s debut, an emergence of women portrayed through spectacle and seduction became prevalent, pairing conventionally attractive women with products on advertising posters.<sup>14</sup> (Figures 2,3) The flat representation of the barmaid, presented among bottles of beer and liquor, mimics a woman in an advertising poster. A notable difference, however, is that her demeanor isn’t seductive or flirtatious.<sup>15</sup> Instead, she appears somewhat detached. While scholarship often focuses on her unidentifiable, straightforward gaze as a reflection of the ambiguity of her social class, or a statement on alienation, this lack of readable emotion contributes to a dehumanization that enforces her representation as a commodity presented flatly in both expression and style among the other items of consumption for sale at the bar.

As described by Clark, by the time of this painting the Folies-Bergère had become a permanent fair for prostitutes.<sup>16</sup> Advertising the sexual lure of girls who served there did not mean all would engage in prostitution; however proprietors encouraged this perception to attract male customers to the venue.<sup>17</sup> This ambiguity added to the excitement of the experience for those who were looking for sexual interaction. While women servers were required to converse and flirt with their male customers, encouraging them to spend more time and money at the bar, the reality of the evening ending in an actual sexual transaction was more than a possibility at the Folies-Bergère. The women were empowered to make their

<sup>8</sup> Biome, *Manet’s ‘Un Bar Aux Folies-Bergère’ as an Allegory of Nostalgia*, 236.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Iskin, *Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet’s Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Biome, *Manet’s ‘Un Bar Aux Folies-Bergère’ as an Allegory of Nostalgia*, 236.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 332.

<sup>14</sup> Iskin, *Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet’s Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Biome, *Manet’s ‘Un Bar Aux Folies-Bergère’ as an Allegory of Nostalgia*, 241.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 387.

<sup>17</sup> Ross, *Serving Sex: Playing with Prostitution in the ‘Brasseries à Femmes’ of Late Nineteenth-Century Paris*, 293.

own decisions regarding their involvement in prostitution, which reduced the establishment's role as a place for soliciting sex.<sup>18</sup> Since the transaction was between the woman and her customer, the Folies-Bergère benefited from the girls' reputations as possible prostitutes without absorbing outright responsibility for the illegal activity.<sup>19</sup> Because the establishment made money through drink purchases, female servers were given an opportunity to make money for themselves through sexual solicitation while the establishment benefited from their alluring behaviors.<sup>20</sup>

While Manet's choice of setting, a place known for engaging with prostitution, reinforces the barmaid's representation as a commodity, an iconographic analysis contributes to this representation as well. As Armstrong observes, Manet constructs the barmaid, the counter, and the products for sale as a modern day still life, replacing the traditional, domestic items of fruit, flowers, and food with a commercial space of consumer goods.<sup>21</sup> This shift from domestic to commercial reflects the changes to Parisian life characterized by Haussmannization, with folks partaking in activities previously reserved for domesticity, such as eating, drinking, and socializing, to new public spaces. By representing the barmaid as a flat, unemotive figure included among the still life array of the bar's offerings, Manet adds her to the menu of what's available for purchase at the Folies-Bergère.

As Carol Armstrong observed, when considering the barmaid is presented as a commodity for purchase among the beer, champagne, liquor, and oranges, it is easy to see how she is similarly shaped like the bottles of alcohol and crystal glass displaying the oranges, reinforcing her as an object of consumption.<sup>22</sup> The corsage of flowers on her decollete could be decorative or an element of feminine domesticity to soften the objectification, however, it is noteworthy that the corsage is similar in shape to the red triangle logo on the beer bottles, visually connecting a corporate logo on the bottles label to the barmaid.<sup>23</sup> Nineteenth century viewers were familiar with the red triangle logo of Bass beer and its presence on the bar indicates that advertising and mass-production were in full swing.<sup>24</sup> In fact, to further enforce the theme of commodity in the painting, Manet chose to place his signature on the label of the champagne bottle on the bottom left, as Iskin explains, "alluding to the discourse of selling and consumption that invades not only everyday goods but works of fine art as well."<sup>25</sup>

Finally, as Larry Ligo points out with his iconographical study of the painting, Manet was known to include oranges in paintings of women who he "intended to be recognized as sexually promiscuous."<sup>26</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, oranges were associated with the mythological Golden Apples of Hesperides and Manet's association of oranges to promiscuity likely related to the meaning of Hesperides's name, which translates, as Ligo explains, to the "daughter of the evening who reclines."<sup>27</sup> Ligo cites the 1862 painting *Reclining Young Woman in Spanish Costume* (figure 4) as an example of this, featuring a reclining woman and a cat playing with oranges. The presence of the cat in *Reclining Young Woman in Spanish Costume* strengthens Manet's symbolic use of oranges for sexual promiscuity as Manet was known to paint cats to signify female sexuality, as seen in his

<sup>18</sup> Ross, *Serving Sex: Playing with Prostitution in the 'Brasseries à Femmes' of Late Nineteenth-Century Paris*, 293.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Carol Armstrong, *Manet Manette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 270.

<sup>22</sup> Armstrong, *Manet Manette*, 292.

<sup>23</sup> Larry L. Ligo, *Manet, Baudelaire and Photography*, (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 717.

<sup>24</sup> Iskin, *Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ligo, *Manet, Baudelaire and Photography*, 719.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

famous reclining nude *Olympia*. (Figure 5) While some scholars may analyze the oranges in *A Bar at Folies-Bergère* to be another sign of domestic decoration in a public space, Manet's past iconography suggests he included them to signify the presence of prostitution, if not with the barmaid directly, certainly at the Folies-Bergère.

When considering the cultural context of the Folies-Bergère, the concert hall, and nightlife culture, along with the emergence of the fashionable working class female at the time of the painting's debut, the barmaid in *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* can successfully be read as a representation of commodity, specifically the commodification of the female as a marketing device, and likely, a sex worker. Although we cannot ascertain Manet's precise intent, a cultural, formal, and iconographical analysis determines an allusion to prostitution, and any ambiguity to this certainty accurately reflects that historically, while not all female employees were prostitutes, some were, and all were encouraged to allude to the possibility at the Folies-Bergère. By the time of *A Bar at Folies Bergère*'s debut in 1882, the modernization of Paris led to an increase in public spaces, specifically those that included women not only as a demographic but also as a marketing device. A study of Manet's main figure in the painting communicates the increasing importance of consumer culture at the time, with an emphasis on how it relates to women. The barmaid is portrayed as a modern, fashionable figure of the emerging female working class, presented flatly as an object for purchase along with the rest of the bar's wares, and positioned directly facing the viewer, prepared to serve the customers at the popular Folies-Bergère.

## Illustrations



Figure 1. Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882, oil on canvas, 96 x 130 cm (Courtauld Gallery, London)

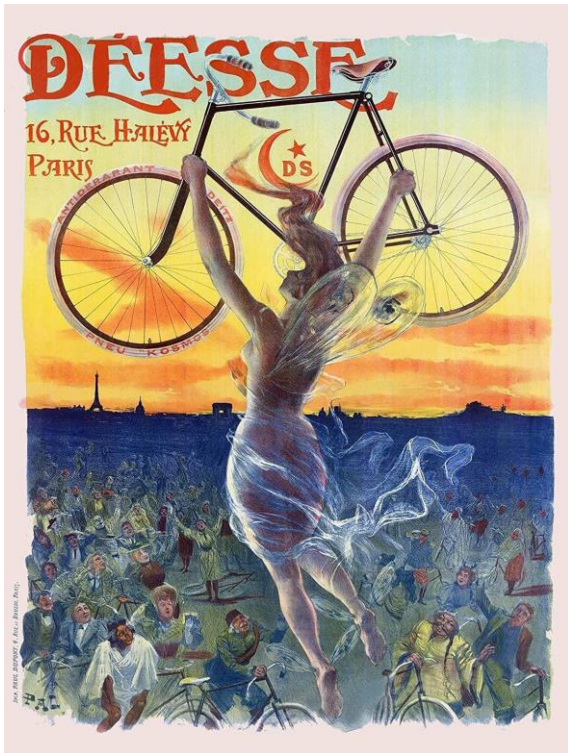


Figure 2. Jean de Paleogue, Art Nouveau Fairy Woman (Deese Bicycles Advertising Poster), 1898



Figure 3. Jules Chéret, Jardin de Paris advertising poster, 1890



Figure 4. Édouard Manet, *Young Woman Reclining in Spanish Costume*, 1862



Figure 5. Édouard Manet, detail of cat in *Olympia*, 1863

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