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Renoir and the Rococo revival

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RENOIR AND THE ROCOCO REVIVAL

by

Michael Traver Ridlen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Art History in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

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This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

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In loving memory to Rick Ridlen
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INTRODUCTION

Renoir is considered one of the leading artists of the Impressionists. He is often referenced as a painter of happiness and joy. There is surprisingly less scholarship about him than the other leading Impressionists, such as Degas or Monet. This is attributed to the influence on his work of classical art and his emphasis on traditional subject matter.¹ In addition to countless articles, his work has been the subject of recent exhibitions, most notably Colin B. Bailey and Linda Nochlin’s catalogue, *Renoir’s Portraits: Impressions of an Age* as well as recent monographs, most significantly those by Gerard Néret, *Renoir: Painter of Happiness* in 2001 and Anne Distel, *Renoir* in 2010. Renoir is widely acknowledged as a painter of idealized women, a painter who inherited the tradition of the Rococo and themes associated with that style’s so-called “frivolousness,” and as a painter who expressed the joy of life but who lacked serious intellectual themes in his art. This thesis looks at these facets of Renoir’s art more closely and seeks to demonstrate that Renoir was engaged with the representation of serious themes and ideas in his depictions of women and in his engagement with the Rococo Revival.

Women increasingly become the focus for artists like the Impressionists who portrayed the modern world. In the Impressionist circle, Renoir became famous as one of the artists most interested in the new women of Paris. He portrayed women of the upper middle classes because of his interest in their developing lives as members of the leisure class. His paintings of women have been linked to the depictions of women by the great artists of the past such as Titian, Rubens, and Boucher, who celebrated female beauty and

women’s traditional roles. Renoir is noted for saying that he had no interest in portraying ideas, but by necessity, ideas about women and society do inform his paintings of these themes. He reveals his own ideas through his artistic choices in style and subject matter as well as interpretation. Because of his interest in women’s nature and role in society, we can assume that he absorbed prevailing ideas about them from his intellectual circle, that of the publisher George Charpentier and his wife, which included Edmond de Goncourt among many other naturalist writers.

Feminist scholars have been drawn to Renoir’s representations of women. Some of these scholars, particularly Griselda Pollack, Linda Nochlin, and Tamar Garb, use Renoir’s paintings of women as foils for other artists. These scholars offer the viewer of these paintings valuable clues to the importance of images about women to the nineteenth century. But Renoir’s images are not often studied on their own terms, within their social and intellectual contexts. For feminist studies, Renoir’s depictions of women act as a conservative foil because it appears that his position on feminism was clear when he wrote, “I like women best when they don’t know how to read; and when they wipe their baby’s behind themselves.” I do not believe this should be the end of the discussion about Renoir’s representations of women.

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3 Ibid., 3.

To better understand Renoir’s depictions of women in the nineteenth century, we must examine his interactions with the Rococo Revival. The Rococo Revival in the second half of the nineteenth century was inspired by the art critics and naturalist writers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt who were shocked by the lack of attention paid to eighteenth-century French art. They wrote extensively about it, especially in their important book, *French Eighteenth-Century Painters*, which was first published as articles between 1856 and 1876. This book was not the first critical response to the Rococo Revival, but it marks a turn toward its increase in popularity within intellectual and artistic circles, including the Impressionists later in the century. The Goncourts’ descriptions of French Rococo painters such as Watteau, Boucher, Chardin and Fragonard, became the fundamental means of understanding those artists in the nineteenth century. Their characterizations of eighteenth-century artists help us to understand the way Renoir engaged with the Rococo masters and speaks to the importance he placed on their depictions of women.

The Goncourt brothers are acknowledged as being tremendously influential in the revival of interest in eighteenth-century art and culture. They are most often cited in studies on the late nineteenth century because of their famous journals, which provide valuable insight into the biographies of the artists from this period. From a more cultural standpoint, they are acknowledged for their active fight to revive the forgotten

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eighteenth-century painters. Yet most scholarship on nineteenth-century French art overlooks the profound influence of the Goncourts’ ideas about women of the eighteenth century, especially seen in *The Woman of the Eighteenth Century, Her Life, from Birth to Death, Her Love and Her Philosophy in the Worlds of Salon, Shop and Street* published in 1862, as well as their many other social histories about the eighteenth century. The Goncourts were well known in their own time for their precise historical fact gathering and it has been overlooked how these insightful authors may have influenced the artists of their own times. This is especially pertinent to Renoir because of his extensive interactions with eighteenth-century art and cultural ideas. The Goncourt brothers, for example, provide descriptions of the eighteenth century’s love of nature that parallels Renoir’s reverence for nature.

By closely examining Renoir’s paintings of women and analyzing them in light of the ideas of the Goncourt brothers about the Rococo, this thesis challenges the idea that Renoir’s paintings should be seen as frivolous and lacking in intellectual gravity. Even if he is most well known for his joyful subject matter, this should not limit the discussion of ideas within his many works.

In the first chapter, I will discuss Renoir’s involvement with the Goncourt brothers and his close interest in the themes of the Rococo. I will show how his connection with the Rococo surpasses superficial imitation and brings Renoir into direct dialogue with eighteenth-century ideas and motifs.

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11 They wrote social histories on the Directory and Marie Antoinette, among others.

In the second chapter I will explore the ideas about women that arose in the eighteenth century as seen in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and how Renoir puts them to use in his paintings of his wife, Aline Charigot. I will discuss Renoir’s dialogue with Rousseau’s natural roles for women, especially the practice of breastfeeding.

In the last chapter, we will look at Renoir’s career as an Impressionist in Paris and his interaction with the fashion of the day. During the rise of haute couture in Paris, emerging fashion was embraced most famously by Baudelaire, who despised the idealization of nature. Here we will look at Renoir’s retort to Baudelaire’s ideas shown in his paintings of fashionable women. I seek to show that Renoir represented the natural woman, as understood by Rousseau, in various ways throughout his Impressionist period, even as financial reasons constrained the artist to represent the busy city life of Paris.

In summation this thesis will analyze Renoir’s depictions of women, his love of eighteenth century artists, and the ideal of the natural woman he would return to throughout his career. I seek to demonstrate that Renoir was not superficially engaged with the Rococo Revival; rather, we shall see how deeply Renoir is in debt to Rousseau’s ideas and Rococo aesthetics.
CHAPTER ONE- RENOIR AND ROCOCO AESTHETICS

Many scholars who have written excellent biographical accounts of Pierre Auguste Renoir, including Gilles Néret and Anne Distel, recognize that Renoir always admired and painted Rococo themes. The monumental works of his Impressionist period and even the classicizing and pearly paintings of his later years use themes from Rococo artists like Fragonard and Watteau. Despite discussing his interest in Rococo paintings, Neret and Distel do not specifically look at Renoir’s actual paintings closely enough to see how else he references the Rococo. This chapter will address how Renoir selectively combined Rococo stylistic features and iconography to create innovative paintings that addressed contemporary social issues.

His acquaintance with the Rococo began much earlier, from his first job as a porcelain decorator. Renoir came from a lower working class family and thus sought employment at a young age. His older siblings encouraged him because he had some talent at drawing, to obtain a position in a porcelain workshop where he was charged with painting Rococo flower motifs onto popular luxury items. The year was 1854, and the Rococo Revival, which had started under the July Monarchy, was still in full swing. Its influence on the decorative arts meant that young Renoir participated in the Revival, decorating his white porcelain with the pearly, pastel palette of the Rococo. According to Néret, Renoir was so fast at painting flowers that he was able to make a moderate living.

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14 Ibid.

at this task.\textsuperscript{16} He then began to challenge himself, painting figures of Venus and silhouettes of Marie-Antoinette. He would later recall that profiles of the former queen brought him eight sous a piece.\textsuperscript{17}

Eventually the porcelain workshop replaced human workers, including Renoir, with machines, and he then found work as a fan painter.\textsuperscript{18} The influence of the Rococo was reinforced for the young Renoir in this line of work as well, because he was called upon to replicate famous paintings, especially Watteau’s \textit{The Departure from Cythera} of 1717.\textsuperscript{19} The fan was a popular accessory until the late 1850s, and when it went out of fashion, Renoir was once again out of a job. He turned again to painting decorative items, this time, blinds.\textsuperscript{20} Not much is known about this time in his career, but soon thereafter he began his serious study of art under the tutelage of Gleyre in 1862.\textsuperscript{21}

Renoir would later say he learned nothing while apprenticed to this classically-inspired painter. Instead, he spent his days at the Louvre. And once again it was the Rococo masters that inspired him. Renoir recalled at the end of his life, to his friend Vollard, that Boucher’s \textit{Diana At the Bath} from 1742 was especially captivating; he


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Distel, \textit{Renoir}, 25.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Néret, \textit{Painter of Happiness}, 22.

\textsuperscript{21} Distel, \textit{Renoir}, 27.
copied it many times. As Renoir advanced as an artist, he would continuously borrow themes from the Rococo but update them with people and styles from his own era. In many of his works he specifically looks to the artist Fragonard as the exemplar of the Rococo. His own personal background in painting from the Rococo led to shared subjects, composition and style between his own paintings and those of Fragonard. He loved the vitality of Fragonard’s settings and the optimism that his themes embodied. Fragonard’s works are filled with narratives about love and trysts of the wealthy while brimming with joy. His paintings lack the irony and underlying melancholy of Watteau’s paintings of similar themes. Throughout the nineteenth century, Renoir would again and again draw on the insight of eighteenth century while maintaining his own unique style of painting.

Because of the visual values of The Swing from 1876 (figure 1), Anne Distel and Gilles Néret both see the painting as part of Renoir’s larger output in his Impressionist years and one of his masterpieces. In 1876, Renoir was at the height of his Impressionist phase and was interested in the play of light effects over his Rococo-inspired subjects, using a style he developed as a painter of porcelain before he became a

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22 Ibid., 247.


modern painter. Another of his most famous works from this period is Dancing at the Moulin de la Galette from 1876 (figure 2). Both Néret and Distel consider The Swing and Dancing at the Moulin de la Galette to be a pendant pair because both of their themes are related to the Rococo. The Swing is the calmer of the two paintings, while Néret calls Dancing at the Moulin de la Galette “a nineteenth century fête galante,” like those painted by Watteau and Fragonard in the eighteenth century. The focus in this category of painting is the enjoyment of fashionable people in an idealized setting. Renoir’s nineteenth-century fête takes place at a well-known dance hall in Montmartre, which gives the painting its name, as opposed to Watteau’s idealized gardens or mythical Cythera. Néret claims that Renoir’s color palette, optimism and even the chaotic feeling to the characters refer back to Rococo subject matter.

Renoir painted The Swing in 1876, still early in his career and exhibiting with the Impressionists. Although this particular painting references the many similar late-eighteenth century paintings of women swinging, the most famous depiction Fragonard’s The Swing from 1767-8, now in the Wallace Collection (figure 3). Renoir’s The Swing directly recalls Fragonard’s rendering of the swinging woman because like Fragonard, Renoir shared his sensibility for cryptic narratives focusing on a few figures in the foreground.

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27 Neret, Painter of Happiness, 107.

28 Ibid.

29 Distel, Renoir, 137.

30 Neret, Painter of Happiness, 246.

31 Ibid.
The Goncourt brothers, in their *Painters of the Eighteenth Century* from 1856-76, discuss Fragonard as “a poet of *ars amatoria.*”\(^ {32}\) They say of Fragonard’s *The Swing,* that it is disguised in mischievous elegance and it is a pleasure garden echoing the secret man, with a secret gaze.\(^ {33}\) However, they also praise Fragonard as the painter of impressions, for his quick brushstrokes and inspired spontaneity.\(^ {34}\) In these descriptions the Goncourt brothers show why they thought of Fragonard as an innovative painter and worthy of emulation. In contemporary scholarship, Jennifer Milam suggests, in her article, “Playful Constructions and Fragonard’s Swinging Scenes,” that Fragonard was also interested in playful art-making as well as erotic pleasure and leisure.\(^ {35}\) His brushstrokes were varied depending on whether or not they were appropriate for a painting, conforming to an eighteenth-century artistic convention.\(^ {36}\)

These playful constructions echo the theme and subject matter in the setting through the way in which they are painted. In Fragonard’s depiction of a swinging woman, in *The Swing,* the focus is on a woman being pushed on a swing by an elderly man barely visible in the background. The swing was a popular game along with other examples such as see-saws and blind man’s bluff which aristocrats of the eighteenth


\(^{33}\) Ibid, 282.

\(^{34}\) Ibid, 290.


century often played in their gardens, all of which have sexual connotations when depicted in paintings.\(^{37}\) In Fragonard’s *The Swing*, a young man is hiding in the bushes watching the swinging woman, even looking up her dress as her shoe flies off her foot. The idealistic garden setting is alive, swirling, and vibrant around them. The trees in the background are made up of bunches of leaves that seem similar to rising, swirling mist; the strong tree trunk in the foreground and the exposed branches are elegant, flowing serpentine lines, which create this extraordinary garden scape. This dynamic use of light is one major similarity that ties Renoir’s *Swing* to Fragonard’s painting, although Renoir has made his brushstrokes more visible.\(^{38}\) The main figures are close to the picture frame, centered on the woman and a man with his back turned to the viewer. They are standing on a path in a forest or park, which Renoir emphasizes through the use of varying lighting effects as the path goes deeper into the woods. His brushstrokes are loose and create an image that implies the spontaneity of the scene captured. The visual pleasure of Renoir’s painting is related to a well-known love of spectacles characteristic of the time. Like the man and child on the left of the painting, we are attracted to the scene simply because of the style and light effects on the figures on the path that provide aesthetic pleasure to the viewer. The theme of pleasure provides the important link between the two paintings of Fragonard and Renoir, which share a similar iconography.

Renoir has an interest in using this iconography of the swing because it transparently tells the viewer about the relationship in the painting. Donald Posner in his


\(^{38}\) Ashton, *Fragonard*, 229.
important article, “The Swinging Women of Watteau and Fragonard,” describes how the iconography of the swing in Rococo art is an emblem of sexuality and love. He notes that even the motion of Fragonard’s swing implies the figures’ sexual relationship. Even Milam confirms the implied sexuality of the swing, but she goes further to say that Fragonard is also concerned with painting in general and his images of games reveal painting playfully as well as the playfulness and sexuality of the figures within the painting. Renoir uses the emblem of the swing to show the sexual relationship of his figures and he conveys in the atmosphere, like Fragonard, the same sympathetic relationship between painting style and his figures. Renoir, then, does not use the swing as a static symbol but innovates, following Fragonard’s example. The swing as an emblem of sexuality is obviously understood by those well versed in French art, but it does not fully account for the narrative that Renoir creates which is not the same sort of composition that we see in preceding eighteenth-century depictions. We should now look at the painting in contrast to the eighteenth century-precursors.

Renoir’s The Swing is a scene from everyday life, so the fanciful nature and the intimate meeting of the nobles in the eighteenth-century precedents are gone. The outdoor scene now takes place on a path in a public park in Paris. We can see figures in the background who are not involved in the main drama; thus, the painting loses the intimacy of Fragonard’s Rococo depiction. The four figures in the foreground of Renoir’s painting are all exchanging looks. On the far left, on either side of a tree, a child and a man look at

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40 Milam, “Playful Constructions and Fragonard’s Swinging Scenes,” 543 and Sheriff, Fragonard, 149.
a man who is turned away from us. This man directs our gaze with his stance and our eyes move to the woman in white holding the swing, the focus of the painting.

While all the other figures’ gazes are fixed on their targets, the woman blushes, her posture is slumped as if she is self-conscious or shy. She is standing on the swing but leaning and looking away from the other figures. The obvious sexual meaning is implied by her beauty, coyness and the iconography of her swing, but all advances are on hold because of her bashfulness as opposed to the woman on Fragonard’s painting who is passively while she is being pushed on the swing. It as if the man with his back-turned to us proposed something that offended or embarrassed the blushing girl. Literally, the woman is holding onto the swing, so it cannot go anywhere. If the atmosphere in Fragonard’s Swing’s represents the motion of the woman swinging, the strong verticals of the tree and the standing figures in Renoir’s work reinforce the stillness of the woman’s swing and seem to indicate that her sexual desire is on hold. Even the thick brushstrokes, creating a pattern of the light on the path, give a stillness to the painting.

Instead of simply copying one of the masters he admired, Renoir uses Rococo emblems not to show idealized love games, but to depict an intimate drama between couples in public spaces. Renoir’s The Swing has transformed an eighteenth-century tryst to mere flirting in public spaces of the nineteenth century. Renoir never lets us leave the reality of modern life in this painting because, as mentioned above, he paints other couples in the background without any association to the main drama. The scene is connected to an actual locale in contemporary society (i.e. a public garden in Paris) and is not a place of fantasy. The man and child’s gaze tell us that the space is not an intimate garden for just the couple, but it more likely a nineteenth-century promenade through a
public park. The child and man behind the tree gaze toward the man, not the woman, so they seem to be waiting for his response to her shyness; they even seem worried about how the scene will unfold.

Most of the women in the painting are dressed in white, telling us about the season, high fashion and symbolically representing purity and sexual virtue. Renoir’s playful construction is at work in the painting as well, for he is not constructing a work about frivolousness and excess, but instead about beauty and modesty, for the woman on the swing is shy or coy. The man begins the sexual game, but it ends with the woman who is not inclined and is being watched intently. The older, bearded man behind the tree, might be the woman’s brother, or a friend, or a fellow suitor unhappy about the younger man proposing something to the woman. The little girl is also focused on the man with his back-turned, but her figure references innocence and purity and is related through the use of color to the young woman holding the swing. The nature of women is now on display in a garden. The well-dressed figures in the background, as mentioned above, further remind us of the image’s grounding in contemporary life. This analysis of Renoir’s painting as part of a Rococo tradition instead of simply a view of modern life however, allows us to see even works from later in his life as emblems; this enriches their meanings and shows us the extent to which Renoir was invested in the Rococo Revival.

Late into Renoir’s career, his style began to change. His art went through a classicizing period, where he was inspired by Ingres and Raphael and began to emphasize drawing by creating dark contours around his figures.41 He even traveled to Italy and

41 Ibid, 245.
Spain to seek new artists to inspire him.\textsuperscript{42} Despite the fact that his style was dramatically different from his earlier periods, he continued to paint subjects inspired by the Rococo. For example, he treated the theme of women learning how to play the piano many times. This was a type of emblem painting used in the Rococo and, before that, in Dutch art of the seventeenth century. Just like The Swing from his Impressionist period, Renoir’s Piano Lesson from 1889 (figure 4) alludes to a well-known work by Fragonard of the same name from 1769, but Renoir changes many aspects of the scene.

The precedents for Fragonard’s painting, The Piano Lesson from 1769, (figure 5) are the genre scenes in the Dutch tradition. The Dutch tradition has a rich heritage of emblems with easily understood messages. In the Dutch tradition, music and musical instruments invoke passion, especially in women.\textsuperscript{43} There are emblems that show women seduced by men playing music and even Cupid with a lute with the saying “Love is the teacher of music.”\textsuperscript{44} The seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jan Steen depicts this association of music and arousing passion in painting in his Harpsichord Lesson (figure 6) from 1660.

Jan Steen is well known for incorporating moralizing and humorous motifs into his genre scenes. In The Harpsichord Lesson,, he depicts a piano lesson between an elderly teacher and a young woman. Instead of employing an awakened cat to indicate the sexual content of the scene, as we see in Fragonard, there is a painting hanging on the

\textsuperscript{42}Distel, Renoir, 197.


\textsuperscript{44}Ibid, 115.
wall behind the girl playing the piano. The uncovered portion of the painting gives the viewer a glimpse of Venus and Cupid, both fast asleep. However, Leo Steinburg in his article “Steen’s Female Gaze and Other Ironies,” suggests that the Harpsichord Lesson is an example of Steen’s “salacious wit,” and we should not expect it to be read without a sense of humor.\textsuperscript{45} He suggests that the sleeping Venus is about to be woken up by the music, which is implied by the curtain half uncovering the Venus painting and the key to the awakening of her sexual arousal.\textsuperscript{46}

In Fragonard’s \textit{The Piano Lesson}, the narrative space focuses on a well-dressed woman at the piano while her teacher stands over her with his hand on the page of music she is playing. In this composition, the quick brushstrokes of the background do not indicate any type of setting, but the foreground contains an alert cat, sitting in a chair, an indicator of the woman’s sexuality. The woman’s posture echoes the cat’s alertness by its over-stiffness while the man is looking down her dress from above. This painting is characteristic of Fragonard because the games of love are indicated by iconography and the gaze.

Renoir’s Music Lesson is also within the emblematic tradition of showing music able to invoke passion. In Fragonard’s and Jan Steen’s version, the girl’s sexuality is just being awakened, shown by the posture of the cat and the waking Venus. For Renoir, the subject matter of the piano lesson comes to fruition in many different variations. He uses the same composition of a close up view of a music lesson, but no longer uses many of the elements of the previous examples, including the male teacher, who has been replaced

\textsuperscript{45} Leo Steinburg, “Steen’s Female Gaze and Other Ironies,” \textit{Artibus et Historiae} 11, No. 22 (1990), 107.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 110.
by a young woman teaching a younger girl. The teacher is not looking at her student, instead she is positioned behind her and looking over her shoulder, at the music. In contrast to Steen and Fragonard’s teacher’s positions, which encase their students while only touching music sheets, Renoir’s teacher’s hand is placed tenderly on her student’s waist showing the close relationship of the two figures. Because of the contrast of her hand and the girl’s dress, the viewer focuses on the placement of the teacher’s hand. The tenderness of this touch, the style of the painting and prominent still life, are why Renoir’s painting is similar to its predecessors, however, Renoir’s painting has major still life elements.

Renoir uses a vase of flowers as a singular still life element. The flowers are in full bloom, and are similar to the flowers he would have painted early in his career on porcelain. Flowers, like Venus and the cat in the proceeding paintings, are also associated with women’s sexuality, but this time it as if the music shows the blooming of the young woman’s sexuality. The pure white candle, which is not lit, may indicate that sexuality and passion are not yet ignited.

The sexuality of the painting is not a narrative about flirting, instead, I believe Renoir has purposefully used vibrant color choices and stylistic brushstroke choices to create visual pleasure, akin to looking at a bouquet of flowers. This implies a sexual viewing of the women, so the narrative is superseded by the visual stimulation. The red dresses of the women are vibrant and red is associated with the passion the music could be stimulating. Renoir paints a number of other paintings of girls at the piano but they

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lack the interplay between teacher and student that makes *The Piano Lesson* part of the Rococo tradition.

Related to Renoir’s *The Piano Lesson* is his painting, *Girls at the Piano* (figure 7) from 1892. In this composition, Renoir kept the format of the girls both on one side of the piano seen earlier in *The Piano Lesson* and kept the vase of flowers still-life on top of the piano. He softens his brushstrokes, however, he varies the palette, and creates an interior space for the setting. These formal elements soften the composition, so it does not appear as sexually charged as *The Piano Lesson* from 1889. He further divorces the image from narrative qualities by focusing in on the girls and placing in the immediate foreground an arm of a chair and sheets of music. This intimacy makes the viewer a part of the power of the music and tenderness of their concert. This later image was bought by the French state and according to Distel and Néret was an important theme for Renoir.49

I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter that throughout his career Renoir continued to look to the Rococo not only superficially, in terms of stylistic elements as discussed by Distel and Néret, but in the iconography of his images as well. He invokes emblems that recall those seen in Fragonard and Steen’s paintings, but conveyed in ways that were innovative and with references his own time.

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48 Ibid, 280.

CHAPTER TWO RENOIR AND ROUSSEAU’S NATURAL WOMAN

In this chapter I seek to demonstrate that Renoir was inspired by the Rococo not only because of its themes, stylistic conventions and emblematic visual language, but also because it accorded with his belief about the natural state of women. In the eighteenth century the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously espoused ideas about the state of nature and particularly about the roles of women in society. There is no record of Renoir directly reading Rousseau’s writings. Nevertheless, Rousseau’s concepts had become a standard part of the discourse of thinkers of the nineteenth century, and his works were well known in the intellectual and artistic circles, which involved Renoir. Thus, we can see Rousseau’s ideas about the natural woman reflected in his art as a Rococo theme. Renoir’s patron, Madame Charpentier, brought him into her circle which featured the influential author, Edmond de Goncourt, well-known for his writings about the French Rococo and discussed earlier in this thesis. Goncourt wrote about the importance of Rousseau and the influences of his ideas in the eighteenth century, especially concerning women and nature. Renoir and Edmond Goncourt both shared an interest in women and especially the depictions of their lives in paintings from the eighteenth century French Rococo period as well as their own century.

As discussed earlier, the Rococo was revitalized in the nineteenth century by the author Edmond de Goncourt. Goncourt’s book, The Woman of the Eighteenth Century, Her Life, from Birth to Death, Her Love and Her Philosophy in the Worlds of Salon, Shop and Street, published in 1862, discusses the culture of the eighteenth century as it pertains to the lives of women. Goncourt is particularly concerned with the lives of the

aristocrats, though he devotes chapters to the other classes. He first describes the relationship of a young woman born to an aristocratic family in the first half of the eighteenth century, and he despairingly discusses the lack of affection and learning between mother and daughter. He laments that it is unnatural for a child to be without affection, saying it is not “the inadequacies of the instruction or inability of the nuns to form a woman to her social responsibilities [that causes social problems]…the [problems] lay rather in the separation of mother and daughter, secluded from the world, open to all the voices of the world, which were constantly bringing in its temptations”. Goncourt uses the story of one girl’s life to generalize about life for women in the eighteenth century. As the mid eighteenth century comes and the woman is now a mother, Edmond notes that Rousseau had captured the imaginations of all women in the eighteenth century. After Rousseau, women lived to be sentimental, to love their children for he “restored virtue to a world exhausted by pleasure;” Rousseau even taught women to be inspired by nature. Goncourt concludes that Rousseau’s most lasting effect was his exhortation to women to breastfeed their children.

Rousseau applied this morality in his program for raising children which he described in the famous philosophical treatise Émile, or On Education from 1762. One of his most influential ideas concerned breastfeeding. He called on all mothers to breastfeed


52 Ibid, 145.


54 Ibid, 291.
stating, “But, let mothers deign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves, nature’s sentiments will be awakened in every heart, the state will be repopulated.”

Nursing occupies a singular and important place in Rousseau’s philosophical thought. It is a cornerstone of how he thought society needed to be remade. Even the frontispiece of *Émile* makes direct reference to mothers nursing their own children (figure 8). This major work had a profound effect on the culture of childrearing in the eighteenth century. Rousseau’s emphasis on the moral importance of breastfeeding became an instant success, and his influence changed the way that mothers and children were depicted by artists of the late eighteenth century. Thus, it is not surprising that the artists of the nineteenth-century Rococo revival would hearken back to Rousseau-like depictions of natural motherhood as the debate over breastfeeding continued.

Rousseau’s natural mother is characteristically domestic and nurturing. She is weak and needs to be sheltered from corrupting society. She takes care of her children. One of the most important moral obligations of the natural woman was a type of loving charity toward her children. The most outward sign of this virtue was found in a woman breastfeeding her children. Natural mothers were supposed to embrace the practice of nursing their own children instead of sending them to wet nurses. Rousseau claimed, and Goncourt agrees, that this was the best way to ensure the foundation for the next generation. It was not just Rousseau who advocated the role of the natural woman. In the nineteenth century, Michelet also put forward the role of the nurturing mother in his book *La Femme*, which summarizes women’s nature as being fragile, motherly and easily corrupted by society. He declares, “The maternal instinct takes precedence over all the

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rest." He draws heavily on the rhetoric of Rousseau from the eighteenth century but modifies it to address modern circumstances, directing his book to an assumed female audience. He even comments about the state of young lovers getting married older and references the changing trends of the time.

Even though Rousseau advocated breastfeeding in the eighteenth century and Michelet in the nineteenth, the idea of mothers nursing their own children had never been fully adopted in France. Even Goncourt recognized that the actual situation of mothers and children in the eighteenth century, even after the popularity of Rousseau, was very different from the ideals portrayed in their art.\(^{57}\) In the nineteenth century, it was still typical for women to practice wet nursing, in which the children were given to another woman, usually a peasant, until they were weaned. This could be dangerous for the children because of inadequate care and disease, so in 1847 the French government began to monitor the wet nursing industry in the villages around cities.\(^{58}\) Throughout the nineteenth century, public reforms helped change the market value of the nurses and ensured their safety. However, the number of women who were registered wet nurses dramatically decreased because of the subtle discouragement inherent in these reforms.\(^{59}\) By the time that the Roussel law of 1873 was passed, there had been such an outcry from


\(^{59}\) Ibid, 103.
Parisian medical professionals that wet nursing was strictly tracked and all wet nurses were registered.\textsuperscript{60} By the turn of the century the wet nursing industry was at its end.\textsuperscript{61}

It is in this context that we will examine Renoir’s 1885 painting of \textit{The Artist’s Wife Breastfeeding their Son} (figure 9). By looking at the visual and social contexts of images of women breastfeeding, and Renoir’s other representations of his wife, we will find that Renoir favored Rousseau’s ideas about the natural woman.

Some scholars suggest that Renoir’s painting of his wife and son was loosely inspired by the works of Rubens and Raphael, instead of looking at other possible layers of meaning. For instance, Néret suggests that Renoir’s love for his wife as subject drew inspiration from Rubens, who often painted his wife as well.\textsuperscript{62} Néret even points to Ruben’s \textit{Helena Fourquet with her son} from 1635 (figure 10), a portrait of his wife with their oldest son, as inspiration for Renoir’s own portrait of his wife and oldest boy.\textsuperscript{63} In Rubens’ painting his wife sits luxuriously dressed with her son on her lap, he is nude except for a hat. Like Renoir’s wife, Rubens’ wife looks out at the viewer in a intimate portrait sitting fashion. In his comparison of basic compositional elements, Néret does not consider why Renoir chose to capture the specific moment of his wife nursing. Other scholars compare Renoir’s painting to the works of Raphael as a source of influence.

The scholars Distel and Daulte both refer to Raphael’s prototypes for the composition of Renoir’s wife nursing which is both an intimate portrait and a depiction of

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 128.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 129.


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
a fundamental aspect of maternity. They point to Raphael’s *Madonna of the Chair* from 1512, which Renoir could have seen in Florence on his trip to Italy as well as the *Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist* which is in the Louvre (figure 11).\(^64\) Raphael’s use of a pyramid in a monumental structure implies the universal nature of holy motherhood.\(^65\) Distel dismisses Rococo precedents for Renoir’s portrait of his wife in favor of Raphael’s Madonnas as his major influence, but I will show that the lack of sentimentality which Distel mentions and the visual evidence suggest another influence and a cultural context that transcends a specific tribute to Raphael. It seems obvious that Renoir admired Rubens as well as Raphael, but I believe his painting of his wife is filled with complex meanings that are not explained in these examples.

Renoir’s depiction of his wife as a mother cannot be accounted for within the context of paintings by Rubens or Raphael. Instead, I believe we must look to Renoir’s biography and the paintings of his wife leading up to this portrait, in order to understand what he was trying to convey. Renoir’s portrait of his wife, Aline Charigot, breastfeeding, marks a momentous change in the artist’s life. No longer a bachelor, he was settling into married life. He first painted his soon-to-be wife in *Luncheon of the Boating Party* of 1880-1881 (figure 12). This image is typical of Renoir’s large genre/portrait scenes, with lots of figures joyfully relaxing in a tightly packed space as seen in his earlier painting, *Moulin de Galette* from 1876 (figure 2). Many of the figures’ faces are recognizable as portraits of Renoir’s friends and Aline appears in the foreground.

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\(^65\) Distel, *Renoir*, 219.
playing with a little dog. This was the same year of his crisis in art during which he felt he needed to get away from Paris and his Impressionistic style.\textsuperscript{66} He decided on Italy and Aline traveled with him. While in Italy, Renoir was inspired by the draftsmanship of Raphael and Ingres which took his art in a new direction.

Many scholars examine the many guises in which Renoir portrays his wife, especially leading up to the breastfeeding portrait. She is pictured as \textit{The Blonde Bather} of 1881-82 (figure 13), painted while they were in Italy. Here she is nude on a seashore, reflecting Renoir’s interest in Ingres’ \textit{Odalisque} and Courbet’s \textit{The Source} from 1856 (figure 14). Distel notes that he paints the nude in sunlight, showing the reflection of light and its reflective qualities off of the sea.\textsuperscript{67} Tamar Garb in “Renoir and the Natural Woman”, had suggested that images of bathers in the nineteenth century, including Renoir’s, should be seen as mystic images which invoke Venus, a tradition since the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{68} Despite the fact that the subject is his wife, Renoir refers to her in title as \textit{The Blond Bather}, suggesting the ideal of beauty and the topos of woman/Venus and the sea. Just as Aline embodies a type of Venus in \textit{The Blond Bather}, in \textit{The Painter’s Wife and Child}, she embodies another ideal woman, the nurturing mother.

Aline is in a very different guise in \textit{The Painter's Wife and Child}, for Renoir is not just putting his wife in the costume of a peasant; he is making a statement about the natural woman as it was understood in his own time. The other important painting leading up to the portrait and featuring Aline is \textit{Dance in the Country} of 1883 (figure 15).


\textsuperscript{67} Distel, \textit{Renoir}, 219.

\textsuperscript{68} Tamar Garb,”Renoir and the Natural Woman,” \textit{The Oxford Art Journal} 8, no. 2 (1985), 24.
Here, Renoir shows Aline dancing with his friend. This is part of a pendant. The other image of the pair done at the same time was *Dance in the City* (figure 16), in which Suzanne Voladon—the painter and a seamstress, as well as a lover to many artists—poses as the dancer. These pendant images seem to be Renoir’s firmest statement about the city and the country. John House suggests that after his trip to Italy, Renoir looked for a new paradise.\(^6^9\) Obsessed with escapism, he only painted pleasure, and so he transitioned away from images of the city to the country.\(^7^0\) In the next chapter I will explore his paintings of fashionable city life, but in this pair of images of city and country life he suggests his allegiance to nature in favor of the country creating a dichotomy between them.

Thus, even before representing Aline as a peasant in her portrait, Renoir associates her with the country. In the country dance she is looking out at the viewer, smiling as the man spins her around. The perspective of the painting is very shallow, which makes the figures more monumental and places the focus on their dance just beyond a still life of a discarded hat in the foreground. Movement is implied by the brushstrokes as Aline is being joyfully spun around. This is appropriate for Aline because at this time she was Renoir’s young lover. It is interesting that a hat similar to the one seen in the portrait of his wife, lies in the foreground, suggesting the hat of her future role as a mother because of its association with peasant women’s protection from the


\(^{70}\) Ibid, 24.
sun. While she is dancing, she is wearing a bright red bonnet, the hat of a young country woman. This cheerful image of young country lovers and their implied future is in contrast to The Dance in the City.

In The Dance in the City, the woman glances over her shoulder to the left and is immersed in her own dance, so she does not acknowledge the viewer’s presence. Renoir has made her aloof. The space in the city dance is especially defined and every contour of the woman’s dress is crisp and even. The background plants are drawn in a way that still has much in common with Renoir’s classicizing period: in The Dance in the Country, however, the background is more blurred suggesting that the city dance is slower more methodical. Distel and Daulte both comment on the decorative nature of the city dance, though they do not apply it to its pendant--The Dance in the Country. The use of Renoir’s wife in The Dance in the Country as opposed to The Dance in the City highlights his association of the country with the “good,” natural woman.

At this point in his career Renoir had become a successful artist, without financial worries. Renoir’s choice to put his wife in the costume of a peasant is not simply a playful disguise for his model, instead I believe he is revealing his own beliefs about women and claiming his wife as the ideal of the natural mother.

Interestingly, statistical data suggests that the largest group of eighteenth and nineteenth century women who refused the services of wet nurses were members of the wealthiest class. George Sussman, author of Selling Mother’s Milk: the Wet-nursing

71 Ibid.


73 Sussman, Selling Mother’s Milk, 104.
Business in France 1715-1914, found that breastfeeding was actually a status symbol for many women; it implied that the woman’s husband made enough money to support his wife and children on his own.74 Complicating the statistical issue is the fact that many wealthy families were able to afford a live-in nurse for their children, freeing up the mother and also acting as a sign of wealth, which seems to contradict the statistical data.75 These complex issues of status leads us to investigate depictions of women breastfeeding in order to help us understand Renoir’s image and its potential associations with his elevated status in society.

Berthe Morisot, a fellow Impressionist and friend to Renoir, in 1880 represented her daughter and nurse in The Wet Nurse Angèle Feeding Julie Manet (figure 17). This reveals that the well-to-do Morisot hired a live-in wet nurse. Renoir and Morisot were good friends throughout most of their adult lives and were both members of the Impressionist group in their early painting careers. By the 1880s the original Impressionists became more disengaged from one another, but Morisot and Renoir remained close until Morisot’s sudden death in 1892.76 And it was her friend Renoir who looked after her daughter Julie.77 So it is not surprising that these friends painted similar subjects, women nursing, in the early 1880s and though they were close, their paintings reveal their different beliefs about women and their social situations.

74 Ibid, 104.

75 Ibid.

76 Distel, Renoir, 292.

77 Ibid., 294.
Renoir and Morisot both were inspired by images and the palette of the Rococo in their paintings, but Renoir, like Edmond Goncourt, looked back to the eighteenth century not only for its style but also its ideals of the natural woman and mother in contrast with his own time. A discrepancy in ideas about breastfeeding that separate Morisot and Renoir is most clearly shown in their very different portraits of nursing women.

As mentioned above The Wet Nurse Angèle Feeding Julie Manet reveals that Morisot hired a live-in nurse, the type preferred by the wealthy, about which the statistics are unclear. In contrast, Renoir portrays his wife nursing their son (1885, figure 9). Morisot’s style is supremely sketchy, so much so that the nurse almost becomes part of the background. Renoir’s wife Aline, in contrast, is heavily outlined and emerges from the more abstract background. Both portraits are placed in outdoor setting, however, the presence of civilization is alluded to by the building to the right of Madame Renoir and the umbrella to the right of Morisot’s nurse.

Despite their stylistic differences, both artists use the women’s costumes to say something meaningful about them. In Morisot’s painting, the woman breastfeeding is wearing the white costume of a nurse and is placed in an idyllic natural environment. According to their critics, wet nurses were thought to be disease carrying and were called the worst kind of mercenary women. Linda Nochlin suggests that according to their supporters, wet nurses were seen as particularly natural because breastfeeding was natural for women. This gave these women a particular social place on both sides of the debate.

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78 Sussman, 110.
with both critics and supporters appealing to “what is natural for women”. Nochlin emphasizes that in polite society, despite the debate over breastfeeding, you gave your child over to a wet nurse, whom you kept in your home to feed the child. The visual information in Morisot’s portrait, suggests that bourgeois women had no desire to be represented as the ultimately natural woman, leaving that for the women who embodied the natural through their work, like wet nurses. Morisot is most concerned with showing her own particular experience of modern life in her modern style of painting and is not interested in representing a woman breastfeeding as either the timeless ideal of the Madonna and Child or following the conventions of the eighteen century.

Renoir did paint a wet nurse, however, in Woman Nursing a Child from 1894, which depicts his family’s nurse Gabrielle breastfeeding his second son, Jean (figure 18). This is late in his career, and Gabrielle had become his favorite model and in Renoir’s old age, she would become his nurse as well. Instead of calling this painting a portrait like his earlier image of his wife, he simply describes it as a genre scene. This painting depicts Gabrielle in one of the many guises Renoir paints her in, however, this depiction is closest to her actual role in the family; but as his favorite model, he would even paint her in Odalisque in 1894. Unlike the various guises of Aline, Gabrielle’s depictions tend to be more about the aesthetic choices Renoir made. They do not necessarily reveal


80 Ibid.

81 Distel, Renoir, 269.
something meaningful about his model. Renoir distinguishes between his wife sitting for a portrait and his favorite model sitting for a genre scene by creating a sentimental atmosphere in the genre scene in contrast to the strong presence for his wife in the portrait. Gabrielle is affectionately looking down at the child as he suckles. The woman and baby are placed in the foreground, taking up most of the canvas. Gabrielle is dressed in a simple blue jacket and white dotted dress, while Jean is facing her and lying almost motionless as he nurses. He is dressed in a pink, loose garment, which makes his body barely distinguishable. The figures are enclosed in a simple scene surrounded by dark-green curtains in an otherwise nondescript setting. Gabrielle’s affectionate gaze toward the child focuses our attention on the moment. While this image portrays her role as a wet nurse for Renoir’s younger son, it is also likely that Renoir emphasized the composition as a sentimental genre scene rather than a portrait.

Now we return to Renoir’s image of his wife breastfeeding their child which continues to engage with artistic traditions of the eighteenth century. His depiction is in dialogue with the long tradition of images which represent mothers nursing. His portrait of Aline, while engaging with contemporary nineteenth century ideas about motherhood, references various allegories and genre scenes, including Rococo portraits of nursing women that directly reflect Rousseau’s teachings and accord as well with Renoir’s beliefs. As noted above, throughout the nineteenth-century doctors’ statistics suggest maternal breastfeeding was a status symbol of the upper classes, although in fact wealthy

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82 Ibid.

families used live-in wet nurses. In Renoir’s portrait, his wife is not dressed like an upper-class woman; she is wearing the smock as well as the hat and the simple shoes of a peasant as she nurses her son. Renoir painted three versions of the scene, varying only background details among them and later, with help from the artist Richard Guino, he created a bronze sculpture of the same scene called *Maternité* in 1916, after his wife died (figure 19). In the first of the three painted versions, the background is only slightly indicated, with only the main group distinguished in great detail. The second version (figure 20) is a more refined version of the first, with no major details changed except more of the garden background is painted, and the tree on the left of the canvas frames the main group. In the third version (figure 21) all of the details are sharply conveyed, Madame Renoir is now sitting on a chair and the tree and building have further receded into the background. In the foreground of this version is a cat cleaning itself, a common symbol for femininity. After the advent of Realism at mid-century, and particularly with the sentimental peasant imagery of Millet, Jules Breton and other, the peasant was idealized and thought of as the basis of society, providing food for all people through agriculture. The peasant was considered closer to nature and using this guise was the perfect way to display his wife as both the natural worker doing her part for society and the virtuous woman who cares enough about her children to breastfeed her son.

Iconic images of women breastfeeding date as far back as the Middle Age’s representations of the Madonna and Child in medieval art as can be seen in an image from *The Paris Hours of René of Anjou*, an illuminated manuscript from 1434 (figure 22). Mary is often noted for her detached gaze, and her sacred aura indicated by her halo

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84 Distel, *Renoir*, 368.
as well as her passive face and posture, which elevates her above everyday women. In this medieval example, Christ as a baby is depicted to the side of the image, and seated in her lap holding up his mother’s breast to nurse from. Her arm that holds him does not provide a real support or comfort for the child. On the other hand, Mary is the largest figure in the scene and her large golden halo draws out attention to her. She does not interact with any of the other figures in the scene, even the servant who is washing her hand, and her child who is suckling. Mary as nursing continues as the most popular depiction of a woman nursing, and later images often continued to have many of these medieval qualities.  

The other place we see images of women nursing is in genre scenes such as Giorgione’s famous painting from the Venetian Renaissance, The Tempest, from 1506 (figure 23). This genre scene is famous for being cryptic. The focus of the image is not on the women nursing, but the tumultuous sky. The woman is nude except for a white shawl, though she is next to a white garment. The woman confronts the viewer’s gaze passively. All except the child’s head is covered by her extended right leg, which is strangely placed. The woman is in the middle-ground of a natural setting on the right-hand side and is being watched by a soldier on the left side of the image. This image’s meaning is still unidentified but we can assume that it relates to the woman nursing a child as a type of traditional Renaissance symbol. Even though the details of her nursing are incorporated into the larger composition. These examples from medieval art, Raphael and Giorgione provided religious and secular precedence for the image of the nursing

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mothers that contributed to the visual language leading up to the eighteenth century and nineteenth centuries.

Eighteenth-century representations of mothers nursing children differed from their pictorial predecessors, in large part because of the inspiration of Rousseau. Carol Duncan, in her seminal article “Happy Mothers,” shows that the images of mothers from the eighteenth century have many distinctions from earlier religious depictions of the Virgin and Child. Whereas the religious depictions of Mary feeding Jesus are sacred, iconic and detached, Duncan notes that the Rococo images are erotic and emotional. This can be linked to Rousseau’s observations on husbands and wives and how breastfeeding will help “tighten the conjugal bond between them.” This suggestion, added to the Rococo sensibility with its emphasis on the sensuality of women, creates an emotionality in the Rococo images that exceed their prior religious counterparts.

Renoir’s image, akin to the eighteenth century portraits, as we shall see, depicts the sitter looking out at the viewer, happy about being seen as a natural mother. The distinct coolness of color and the tone in Renoir’s image gives it not the quality of a sentimental allegory or a genre image but the distinction of a portrait. In Louis-Roland Trinquesse’s portrait Madame Mitoire and her son from 1777 (figure 24), we see several of the same qualities that we see in Renoir’s painting: the relaxed attitude of the sitter


87 Duncan, “Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art,” 573.

88 Rousseau, Émile, 46.

toward the viewer as well as her own child, the large size of the baby kicking its legs in utter contentment at being fed, and the awkwardness of the child’s pose. In the Rococo portrait the sitter’s fine clothing and the lack of a background differ from Renoir who paints his wife as a peasant rather than upperclass. Renoir does, however, refer to the late eighteenth-century message based on Rousseau: mothers should be natural and breastfeed their children. Madame Renoir even affectionately looks back at us, connecting our gaze to the sexual natural of the nursing act.

The mother and child nursing continued to be considered in secular and allegorical terms in late eighteenth-century France after the Revolution of 1789. First, the image became linked to the Republican political agenda in 1793, when the Republic built, on the eminent place of the Bastille, the Fountain of Regeneration—a mother-goddess in the form of the ancient goddess Isis (figure 25).\textsuperscript{90} Isis, pictured in antiquity as the mother of her son Horus, is here appropriated by the Revolution as a secular symbol for the state. The fountain has water coming out of the breasts she holds in her hands; during the festival the water was given a white tint to simulate mother’s milk, symbolic of nurturing.\textsuperscript{91} This monumental allegorical fountain puts the nursing mother into the secular allegory of the nurturing state, related to yet diverging from the Christian Madonna and Child motif.


\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
The First Republic also mandated that women nurse their own children in order to receive government funds, making it firmly part of the Republican agenda.\(^{92}\) And we find images of good mothers nursing their children with a well placed Republican cockade (figure 26) advertised in the manic print culture of the Revolutionary period.\(^ {93}\)

When the short-lived Second Republic held a competition for its new image in 1848, Daumier created, \textit{The Republic} (figure 27), an allegory of a mother breastfeeding her two children. Damier’s Republic is a massive woman on a stone throne. She is broad and powerful, holding the Republican Flag of France. The lower half of her body is covered with a white sheet. At both of her breasts are two children, standing on their own, seemingly too old to breastfeed, and yet nursing from her. At her feet is a blond child reading a book. All of the children are muscular and sculptural. The pose of the reading child is particularly evocative because of his hand on his head. The solidness of the Republic is evident in the massive appearance of the children. Daumier drew on the allegorical mother figure that was so popular during the Revolutionary period.\(^ {94}\)

From the traditional Christ child and Virgin Mary, the Rococo period and then the First and Second Republics codified a secular and politically charged iconography for the Republic. Allegorical figures of mothers and children had become a part of the cultural memory of the Republic and by the time of the late nineteenth century, French visual culture was saturated with images of nursing women. It was in this important historical

\(^{93}\) Ibid.

\(^{94}\) Albert Boime, “The Second Republic’s Contest for the Figure of the Republic,” \textit{The Art Bulletin} 53, No 1 (March 1971), 70.
context that Renoir painted the portrait of his wife nursing his son. The most common
depictions of nursing women in the mid-nineteenth-century were by academic artists who
chose sentimental themes about mothers and children in order to create sentimental
allegories of motherly affection.

Renoir’s portrait is similar in some respects and may recall Hugue Merle’s
Maternal Love from 1863 (figure 28), a painting that won a prize at the Salon. It is
academic in finish and sentimental in feeling. The exact moment chosen by Merle is best
described by Michelet when he writes, “The divine rapture of the first maternal glance,
the ecstasy of the young mother, her innocent surprise at giving birth to a god, her
religious emotion in her marvelous dream which is so real nevertheless.” The woman’s
dress and the modest background in Merle’s painting suggest that she is a peasant. The
main figure is the peasant girl nursing her child. Her gaze of affection is evoked as the
predominate theme and action of the painting. The large baby, sitting on her lap, is
cradled awkwardly by her skirt as her knee is lifted to support the child’s back and head.
The child is nude, which along with the grouping is reminiscent of a Madonna and Child.
The child is enormous and takes up considerable space, he seems more robust than his
mother and it focuses our attention on the gazes between the figures. Her peasant blouse
and bodice are pulled down, exposing her left breast where the child is suckling. We
know that the painting was not intended as a portrait of the sitter, though she has portrait
features. One could assume from its title that the image alludes to allegorical
representations of Charity or other virtuous personifications, though it defies such easy

95 Interview with John Fitzpatrick.

96 Michelet, La Femme, 47.
characterization because of the contemporary dress and setting. There are only two figures in the painting, but the loving family is implied by the simple gold ring on the woman’s hand, prominently situated in the foreground. Unaware of the viewer, the woman and the child are exchanging loving gazes. This is similar to what we see in Renoir’s painting *Woman Nursing a Child*, (1894, figure 18) which, like Merle’s image, is a genre portrait in which all of these elements create the sentimentality of the scene. The brushstrokes are clear and crisp so the scene is not softened but is still very naturalistic. It was an academic convention to place the figures so close to the viewer, so the viewer feels intimate with the mother and child but without a sense of voyeurism. 

Maternal Love was a widely distributed image, and the academically-minded artist recreated it for subsequent patrons.97 The popularity of the image suggests the cultural value of breastfeeding women as well as the taste for sentimental academic paintings in the late nineteenth century.

Jules Dalou was a sculptor who was academically trained, and late in his career he created *Maternal Joy* from 1872 (figure 29). Like Merle’s painting, Dalou’s sculpture defies strict identification as a genre scene or simple allegorical figure because of its sentimental theme about everyday life.98 Dalou depicts a middle class woman feeding her infant. The woman is costumed in a high-collared dress though she manages to reveal her breast without any major adjustments to the lay of her clothing. The focus of the painting is the interaction between woman and child; action is implied in the woman’s

97 Interview with John Fitzpatrick.

gaze and her offered breast which the child has not quite taken. The moment captured is full of expectation and affection. In the 1870s, Dalou moved away from smaller allegorical figures and began to monumentalize genre images in life-size sculptures. But all of the images, like the images of Renoir, reveal his ideas about the nature of women.

John Hunisak notes that the tenderness of Dalou’s domestic genre scenes has to do with the expression of tenderness in his own household, because of his wife’s temperament with their children. This explanation works particularly well for *Maternal Joy*, but it does not account for the changes in his subject matter and depictions later in the decade. While his biography is important, his later sculptures must be placed in the context of his political beliefs, most apparent in his participation in the Commune and his homage bust to Courbet, whose politics are well known. Much more then Renoir, Dalou draws on the Realist aesthetic of the previous decades. Linda Nochlin, in her book *Realism*, describes a major change in which the dignity of labor was no longer represented with ideal allegories, but with a more human, authentic subject matter meant to extol unvarnished nature and the dignity of the men and women peasants who labored within it. Many of Dalou’s simple, naturalistic works seem to belong to this category.

Dalou created two additional genre images of monumental women nursing their children in contemporary dress: *French Peasant Breast-feeding* from 1873 (figure 30),

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99 Ibid., 64.

100 Ibid., 147.

101 Ibid. 179.

102 Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, 121.
and *Boulonnaise Allaitant* from 1877. By the time of their creation, Realism was less politically controversial although Dalou was criticized for not making genre scenes on a smaller scale, thought to be more appropriate for such a subject. In his sculpture, the peasant woman, like Merle’s young mother, is wearing a simple bodice and blouse. Her head is covered and she is wearing sabots, which indicate her station as a peasant. This image of the peasant emphasizes the baby, which is awkwardly placed, twisting to nurse, and which takes up most of the woman’s lap. This is directly opposed to Dalou’s *Maternal Joy* where the infant is tightly tucked away, emphasizing the mother.

These genre groups were meant to be sentimental images; Dalou is emphatic in his point that common people are important. His incorporation of his academic training along with his Realist interest in monumentalizing everyday subjects makes his sculptures of nursing women an incarnation of his political views, likely related to his participation in the Paris commune of 1870.

These images by Dalou combine interests in modern life as well as tradition, similar to those of Renoir and Merle. These three artists depict peasant women nursing because peasants of the countryside were considered closer to nature than upper class women of the city. Rousseau himself esteemed the natural over the urban environment when he stated, “Cities are the abyss of the human species.” This idea of the natural became particularly important for the Realist artists of the mid-nineteenth century as a

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104 Ibid, 56 and 178.

way to valorize peasants’ labor. The consistent use of a large child with a peasant mother in Merle, and Renoir’s paintings and Dalou’s sculptures emphasizes the natural abundance of peasant love and milk. The babies’ health and strength is implied by their larger-than-life depictions.

Renoir seems to be purposefully referencing and continuing the trend of the peasant mother and child motif. His image of maternité, though, is unlike those of Dalou and Merle because he blatantly uses the portrait category to confront the long and changing history of the breast-feeding mother. He then inflects the work with additional meanings. He places his wife as the nursing peasant mother in the fantasy background of an estate garden, and this hearkens back once again to the Rococo. Aline, his wife, gazes out at the viewer, not affectionately down at her child; this differs from other images we have looked at where the child is the mother’s whole world. He pictures his wife as a peasant in a garden, nodding to the Realist tradition with its political and allegorical charge, and also monumentalizes the importance of this theme. Renoir then is not interested in the image as mere documentation of Aline and her son, it also reveals his beliefs about the natural woman and what she contributes to her society through the act of breastfeeding.

As we have seen, Renoir’s The Artist’s Wife Nursing Their Son of 1885 refers directly back to the portraits of the eighteenth century, unlike his friend Morisot who was more concerned with modern life. Renoir references Rococo portraits of nursing mothers because they reflect his beliefs and acknowledge Rousseau’s ideals about the natural woman. Renoir, like Dalou, believes in the importance and natural life of both the

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106 Linda Nochlin, Realism, 121.
peasant and the mother. In the debate about motherhood, with all of its various trends and modern possibilities, Renoir firmly shows his belief in the moral obligation of the natural mother with this important image of his wife nursing their child.
CHAPTER THREE- NATURAL WOMEN AND ARTIFICE

We have seen that Renoir was concerned throughout his career with Rococo aesthetics, themes, and ideas, including the important idea of Rousseau’s vision of the natural woman, as shown in the previous chapter of this thesis. The nineteenth century would bring challenges to that moral belief in nature; most famously, the poet Baudelaire decried nature in favor of artifice, fashion, and beauty. In 1884, Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote his famous novel, Against Nature; that same year, Edmond de Goncourt wrote his last novel, Chérie, about a fashion-obsessed girl who dies young as a consequence for going against her nature, denying herself a family. These two novels embody a dichotomy in beliefs about women and their relation to nature and artifice. Renoir recoiled from these new, Baudelairean ideas and continued to uphold nature. We have seen how his depiction of his wife breastfeeding their son strongly demonstrates that he advocated for Rousseau’s ideas of women as uniquely suited to be affectionate mothers.

In his early Impressionist years, Renoir revered nature and the Rococo but was forced, by his economic situation, to confront the artifice and fashion that enamored modern Paris where he lived and worked. In this chapter we will examine how Renoir found a way to depict the natural woman in the midst of artifice, thereby revealing a tension between the two categories. His experimentation with this dichotomy can be seen in his portrait/genre scenes depicting fashionable women at the theater and especially in one of his last works in the style of the Impressionists, At the Concert from 1880 (figure 35), as we shall see.\(^{107}\) This tension is particularly revealed in Renoir’s career-altering portrait Madame Charpentier and her children from 1878, which was shown in the Salon

of 1879 (Figure 39) and was very well received.\textsuperscript{108} This portrait of a newly rich, bourgeois woman and her children manages to unite both the natural woman as well as the fashionable woman bringing together in one painting the ideas of Rousseau and Baudelaire.

Close analysis of \textit{At the Concert} and \textit{Madame Charpentier and her Children} necessitates an examination of the historical context in which they were made. We will also look at artists Berthe Morisot and James Tissot, who, along with Renoir are in most direct dialogue with the art of the Rococo. Renoir draws on the Rococo most clearly through his use of similar themes and palette as we have seen in the first chapter of this thesis.\textsuperscript{109} Morisot was praised by Renoir for being “like Fragonard,” and is the other Impressionist most engaged with the Rococo Revival.\textsuperscript{110} Tissot, called “the Rococo’s academic” for his polished style, also called upon Rococo conventions and subject matter.\textsuperscript{111} In all three artists’ work we see a tension between nature and artifice and interactions with ideas about women in nature and society, explored using a variety of methods. All of these artists engage with the imagery of the natural mother and fashionable Parisienne, and each reveals in their works how these idealized types became cultural categories for bourgeois and upper class women in the late nineteenth century.

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\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 160.
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\textsuperscript{111} Ireland, \textit{Cythera Regained?}, 167.
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Renoir’s complex style, however, is particularly suited to reveal the dichotomy between nature and artifice.

These Rococo Revivalists took particular interest in the ideals of the Rococo because of art critics and naturalist writers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt who wrote their important books, discussed throughout this thesis, *French Eighteenth Century Painters*, first published in articles between 1856 and 1875, and *The Woman of the Eighteenth Century, Her Life, from Birth to Death, Her Love and Her Philosophy in the Worlds of Salon, Shop and Street*, published in 1862. These books were not the first critical responses to the Rococo, but mark a turn toward the proliferation of ideas about Rococo aesthetics and manners within intellectual and artistic circles, including the Impressionists later in the century. As emphasized in preceding chapters, the Goncourts’ descriptions of Rococo painters became the fundamental means of understanding eighteenth-century artists in the nineteenth century. Their characterizations of eighteenth-century artists help us to understand the way Renoir and the other major artists of the Rococo Revival engaged with the Rococo masters, especially Watteau, as well as with the eighteenth-century’s ideas about women.

The Goncourt brothers described life for fashionable aristocratic women in the eighteenth century by alluding to theatrical aspects of Watteau’s paintings; they praised Watteau’s extensive use of costume and contrived poses as opposed to more naturalistic depictions of the human figure. According to them, Watteau combines nature with the muse of the opera; instead of individuals, in his bucolic scenes we see the stock

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characters of the Comédie Française and the Comédia dell’arte. This is seen in his masterpiece, *The Departure from Cythera* of 1717, as well as in *The Music Party* of 1718. The Goncourt brothers are highly complimentary of the grace and poetry of Watteau’s depictions. Tissot and Renoir’s images of fashionable women socializing allude to Watteau and, more broadly, use his theatrical style to produce drama and narrative, feature elegant costumes, and create intellectual charm and wit.

In the nineteenth-century, however, the theatricality of the Rococo is associated with fashion and the ideology of artifice. This became more apparent when the nineteenth century fashion industry emulated the styles of the Rococo, for example when the Empress Eugénie fashioned herself a new Marie Antoinette in 1855 and even into the 1870s with the introduction of the “Pompadour style,” named after the great art patroness of the eighteenth century. There was also a surge in demand for Watteau’s paintings and a restoration of his reputation. The nineteenth century’s love of fashion and Watteau led to the Rococo Revival’s belief in grace and beauty as constructions similar to fashion. Edmond Goncourt, in *The Woman of the Eighteenth Century, Her Life, from Birth to Death, Her Love and Her Philosophy in the Worlds of Salon, Shop and Street*, uses Watteau’s paintings as examples of what women should be, saying of fashionable

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114 Ireland, *Cythera Regained?*, 31.


116 Ibid., 133.
women, “She must conform to all the compacts of that artificial age, she must master all its studied graces.”

Moral arguments against naturalism increased as the industrial revolution continued into the nineteenth century. Perhaps most pertinent was the voice of Baudelaire, the great poet and art critic who railed against what he saw as a ‘vulgar’ idealization of naturalism. His attack on naturalism as an ideal concept was based on his view that nature’s supporters—men like Renoir and the Goncourt brothers—inherently misunderstood the natural world. He claimed nature as the seat of vice, and virtue as a human construction above the natural that must be taught. We can see that these ideas contradict Rousseau in every way. Baudelaire even directly notes, “The majority of errors in the field of aesthetics spring from the eighteenth century’s false premise in the field of ethics.”

Baudelaire saw beauty inherent in all things that are good, so he continuously concerned himself with the characterization of beauty. Baudelaire, in his essay, “The Painter of Modern Life” from 1863, describes beauty as having two elements: one element that is unchanging and eternal and one provided by the specific time and place. Without the latter, the first would be inaccessible.

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117 Goncourt, The Woman of the Eighteenth Century, Her Life, from Birth to Death, Her Love and Her Philosophy in the Worlds of Salon, Shop and Street, 26.


119 Simon, Fashion in Art, 133.

120 Baudelaire, “Painter of Modern Life,” 32.

121 Ibid., 3.
Baudelaire cites fashion, morality, and passions as beautiful things which change according to specific times and places, but he singles out fashion as particularly important for modernity because it belongs to the domain of visual culture which changes the fastest.122 He suggests that costume reflects the inner soul of morality. For men’s fashion, he makes a link between costume and virtue, the required austere black uniform of the dandy indicates that the wearer is a distinguished gentleman.123 He then goes on to call dandies “the last stand for heroism,” making constant references to dandyism as a religion, therefore plainly making his case linking morality and fashion.124

In a similar manner, women are distinguished by being fashionable and beautiful. He even suggests that fashion allows women to work at being beautiful, which is like teaching virtue to encourage being good.125 Baudelaire emphasizes that a woman’s beauty is inseparable from the products of women’s toilette and her use of cosmetics.126 In a feminist reading, Tamar Garb explains, while thinking of Baudelaire, that during this period women were being “enshrined and enslaved.”127 As goddesses, their sexuality was to be feared and worshiped, but they were also slaves to commodities that created their beautiful presence, their most important possession, only to become commodities

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122 Simon, *Fashion in Art*, 133.

123 Baudelaire, “Painter of Modern Life,” 27.

124 Ibid., 28.

125 Simon, *Fashion in Art*, 133.


themselves. Because of the use of fashion for status and as a way to create social distinction, Leila Kinny in her article “Fashion and Figuration in Modern Life Painting,” rightly suggests that two discourses of fashion emerge from Baudelaire’s essay, one that has to do with etiquette and one that has to do with status. These relate to the function of fashion as a social “barrier or bridge.”

Nineteenth-century discourses on etiquette continuously told women that composition of dress was an outward sign of the internal self, and thus women should look the part of the sober, respectable, and virtuous woman. Etiquette books such as those written by Madame Louise d’Alq, the prolific author of articles on social decorum, emphasize that “one must never be seen to labor over one’s appearance.” Instead, cosmetics and costume should look as though “assigned by one’s birth.” This sentiment was also formed in moralistic literature, suggesting that young girls avoid excessive dresses in favor of something simple. Still, the overall pressure from society emphasized that it was essential to be good looking to find a husband. To be good girls, young women of the nineteenth century were told simultaneously not to be too modest while appearing modest. This emphasis on looking natural by being artificial is an

128 Ibid., 83.
130 Kinny, 285 and Iskin, 42.
131 Ibid.
133 Ibid., 155.
ultimately aristocratic standard and heralded a beginning of anxiety about appearances in all classes. This interaction between views of dress and morality show the importance of social rules. The requirement to be fashionable competed with the stipulation to become a natural, domestic mother. Both ideals demanded different things from women; etiquette was linked to appearing moral, but was also in service to the other discourse related to displaying status.

The wardrobes of women were a crucial unit in the measure of status and contributed to the development of haute couture under the Second Empire and afterward. Women made a show of wealth by the number of changes in costume they made during a day, putting on public display the number of outfits they owned. Middle and upper-class women had a newly acquired fashion consciousness with the creation of new luxury goods. The growth of the textile industry allowed for the lower classes to take up the fashion of the higher classes in the form of ready-to-wear clothing. The information for this new fashion consciousness was distributed by fashion plates produced in periodicals after balls or concerts. Baudelaire sees fashion plates as the truly rational and historically located ideal for beauty. Fashion, then, in turn implies self-fashioning and transformation, the personal process of sharing in contemporary beauty. This self-making is a constant effort to reform nature.

The social art historian Ruth Iskin, in her book Modern Women and French Consumer Culture, notes that Renoir depicts life in Paris as the “pleasures of the flânerie”

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134 Ibid., 285.

135 Kinny, 275.
and “the social life of the boulevard.”136 She alludes to the spectacles along the promenade, at the theater and in elegant balls which privilege seeing and being seen. Because it was important for women to be seen the development of boulevard life was concurrent to the development of consumer goods and fashion for women. As French cultural and luxury goods became the center of the French economy, the ‘woman in public’ lost many of her historically negative connotations. Nineteenth-century women, as primary consumers, became vital for the economy’s survival and quickly gained national recognition as a type.137 In the media, fashionable women were reduced to a type called the *Parisienne*. The *Parisienne*’s fame became one of France’s exports and tourist attractions.138 British magazines even lamented their lack of a complement, wishing for the rise of the *Londonienne*.139 The *Parisienne* type became the powerful paradigm of artifice.

The *Parisienne*, the subject of Baudelaire’s “Defense of Cosmetics,” is a constructed beauty and quintessentially French.140 She embodies all that is chic, feminine, modern, and upper class. Baudelaire emphatically calls her a goddess and notes that every man has admired the beauty created by her toilette. He says dogmatically, “Woman is quite within her rights, indeed she is even accomplishing a kind

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137 Ibid., 184.

138 Ibid., 186.

139 Ibid., 186.

140 Ibid., 187.
of duty, when she devotes herself to appearing magical and supernatural; she has to astonish and charm us, as an idol. She is obliged to adorn herself in order to be adored.”

Where misguided lovers of nature decry cosmetics, Baudelaire notes that it is cosmetics, not nature, that embellish beauty. He later notes that clothes themselves have to be enlivened by the beautiful women who wear them, so that women can rise above nature. The things from her toilette then become a part of the Parisienne. With her cosmetics and fashion sense, she can then perform in the public spectacles associated with her nineteenth-century public persona.

This beauty is artificial, which Baudelaire points out while admiring what is constructed as part of a women’s toilette including her cosmetics and underwear. The fashions of the nineteenth century emphasized body sculpture, generating ideal shapes out of the heavy skirts that constricted movement but created elegant lines. One of the most important fashionable clothing pieces for a woman of the nineteenth-century was her corset, which created the elegant lines of her bust, waist and buttocks. Varying according to fashion, the corset always created unnatural silhouettes by drawing in the waist tighter, rounding the buttocks, and supporting the bust. All the goals of the corset’s body shaping are tremendously uncomfortable for women, but it was associated


142 Ibid., 31.

with status and elegance, in the *Ancien Régime* as well as the late nineteenth century after its reintroduction.\(^{144}\)

The corset had been a staple of costume in the eighteenth century for children as well as women and it was seen as a protective mould that constrained the body like a baby in need of swaddling. Rousseau, among others, had spoken out against the corset because it hindered movement. Therefore, it was unnatural and led to deformity and weakness in men and women, which affected the future of the French nation.\(^{145}\)

However, in the nineteenth century the ideas behind the corset were less concerned with correcting people’s alignment. Rather the nineteenth century was concerned with reshaping the body by changing its appearance to something more aesthetically pleasurable.\(^{146}\)

The corset, then, in the nineteenth-century did not exist for children and was hotly debated for young women, but for mature women it was required as a part of hygiene and because women were thought of as soft and opulent. There were corsets for most activities, even when pregnant or nursing.\(^{147}\) Dr. Casimir Daumas, a doctor from the nineteenth century in favor of the corset, is quoted saying, “The corset is the framework of a woman’s body. It is the foundation of the edifice.”\(^{148}\) Fashion magazines and many

\(^{144}\) Ibid., 150.

\(^{145}\) Ibid., 150.

\(^{146}\) Ibid., 151.

\(^{147}\) Ibid., 159.

\(^{148}\) Dr. Casimir Daumas quoted in *Fashioning the Bourgeois*, 154.
paintings from this period feature women in corsets which are a sign of the fashionable and powerful idol, the Parisienne.

Renoir’s Parisienne (figure 31) from 1874 embodies the conflict between his belief in the natural woman and his acknowledgement of fashionable artifice. The Parisienne is an image that relates to the fashion plate. The contrived poses of public life were characterized in the visual arts by the women in fashion plates who are almost expressionless; their clothing is monumental and appears distinct from them. Renoir, however, felt that even upper-class women should be held to the standard of the natural woman, domestic and affectionate, which contradicted the Parisienne’s virtues of being charming and fashionable. He seems to echo Goncourt who writes about how for women in the later eighteenth century the virtues of home, family and marriage resisted the corrupting influences of fashion.\textsuperscript{149} In Renoir’s painting of the Parisienne we see a dichotomy between the natural woman, full of life, and the fashion plate who is subservient to her clothing. A woman had an obligation to be a natural mother, but society stressed that she should also be elegant, beautiful, and chic; Renoir depicted this fashionable woman as full of life which diverges from the ideals seen in fashion plates.

In a fashion plate from La Mode illustrée of 1874 (figure 32), we see women of fashion and artifice. Renoir’s painting, The Parisienne, refers to these types of fashion plates, but it is also quite different in its vitality, animation and engagement with the viewer. In the fashion plate the women are placed close together, but they do not interact with each other, we see them as distinct from one another. They are almost expressionless, posing in their fashionable clothing, with only simple details indicating

\textsuperscript{149} Goncourt, The Woman of the Eighteenth Century, Her Life, from Birth to Death, Her Love and Her Philosophy in the Worlds of Salon, Shop and Street, 176.
their faces. They do not seem aware of their elaborate costumes, which does not reveal
their natural bodies underneath, and it shows none of the discomforts associated with the
weight and strain caused by their corsets and heavy dresses. They have been placed in a
setting, unlike Renoir’s painting, but the setting is muted so it does not detract from the
main focus, the clothing. The clothing shows the fine details of each fold and the
brighter, sharper colors stand out against the simple background.

Renoir’s Parisienne is depicted against a nondescript grey-blue and white
background instead of the sitting room seen in the fashion plate, which focuses our
attention solely on the woman. She is shown in a stunning blue dress, with elegant fabric
encapsulating all but her face; she greets the viewer pleasantly. Renoir juxtaposes her
face, which is clearly depicted, with the soft creases and edges of her dress, which is
quite different from the fashion plates. Renoir’s Parisienne is also distinguished from a
fashionable type by her smile, which is engaging and a little coquettish, while the women
in the fashion plates do not engage the viewer. This engagement with the viewer shows
Renoir’s interest in revealing a personality and inner life within this figure even when he
is seemingly depicting a fashion plate. The natural woman appears though the artifice of
fashion. Renoir’s interest in the woman inside the clothing reveals his challenge to
Baudelaire’s ideas, even early in his career.

The advertising media sold the idea of the Parisienne to the growing middle
classes and gave the women more animation to make them attractive to customers.\footnote{Iskin, Modern Women, 186.}
Beginning in the 1870s and 1880s ready-made clothing from department stores promoted
fashionable clothing to a wider audience. This was especially important because there
was an economic depression in the 1880s. Many of these posters helped to secure the bourgeois status of the fashionable Parisienne by representing her as a mother, accompanied by her fashionably dressed young daughter, as seen in an image from Aux Travailleurs in 1880 (figure 33). The fashions trickled down through the department stores in Paris and the mail-in catalogues sent to the provinces. In this advertisement the mother engages with the viewer by a self-confident sideways smile, suggesting her happiness. The image draws attention to her tightened corset by the darkening of the background around her waist. The corset associates this ready-made clothing with high fashion. The daughter affectionately looks up at her mother implying her imitation and obedience. The image sold to the bourgeoisie and lower classes is the ideal of the natural mother who is also fashionable. The image suggests that a woman can be both the domestic, natural mother and the fashionable Parisienne, and that her child can follow in her footsteps.

The woman’s silhouette is dramatic because of the contours created by her twisted pose that allows the viewer to see the hourglass shape made by her tightened corset as well as her bustle. She looks out at us and her face has more of a sense of life than a fashion plate, but less than Renoir’s painting because the woman lacks portrait features. The inclusion of the little girl sentimentally looking up at the mother indicates the girl’s emulation of her mother, though the silhouette of the daughter and details of her clothing are not as emphasized—more attention is paid to the girl’s gaze. The woman and the girl are on display as fashionable, so they discourage the viewer to think about the complexity


152 Iskin, Modern Women, 186.
of the advertisement’s message, namely, that women should be fashionable mothers.
Advertisements such as this address consumer ideals that artists were less inclined to represent.

The fashionable woman as a type is continuously explored by Tissot, another artist who, akin to Renoir, was influenced by the Rococo Revival and interested in the modern world. He is especially influenced by Watteau’s use of theater; he depicts the modern world’s rituals as if they were scenes in a theater. He gives close attention to costume and the arrangement of figures; his images have been called modern ‘fête galantes’ because they deal with intrigue and are filled with an irony reminiscent of Watteau’s theatrical mode. Like Renoir, Tissot has many paintings of women in public and his most famous images of the Parisienne are from his series, *La Femme à Paris*. In the specific image, the *Fashionable Woman* (fig. 34) from 1883-5, Tissot makes the image easy to access. This image was made for an audience that can relate to his nuanced, playful treatment of the societal norms of upper class culture; she is Tissot’s *Parisienne*. Like Renoir’s *Parisienne*, she looks out at the viewer, but she is situated at a specific instant at the theater when an older gentleman is helping her get on her coat. All the eyes are on her, including the viewer’s, and she privileges us because of her responsive gaze. Our encounter with her gaze does not convince us of her inner life because our eye is quickly drawn to her costume and the scene beyond her.

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154 Ibid., 37.
Tissot makes the fashionable woman monumental in his painting, like a fashion plate, placing her in the foreground and drawing our attention to her luxurious costume by the high contrast of her dress to her surroundings which he depicts in fine detail. Her head is covered by a white hat and scarf that encircle her face, though her pink lips draw our eye and connect visually with her dress. Her long pink dress contrasts with the exterior of her dark red coat and the white fur interior. The hour-glass figure created by her corset is visible as a silhouette of her dress against the white coat. All the other women are wearing white and most of the men are wearing black, which makes the main figure a splash of color. This is the fashionable woman at her strongest, at the center of attention. Tissot depicts the public life of the fashionable woman in the elaborate interior of a theater. The red carpet down the right side of the canvas leads us on the path the woman is going to take, and we can imagine the gazes fixed on her will follow her until out of sight. Tissot does hint at an inner life for his subject, but her charming superficial expression lets us know that she is still more a fashion plate than a personality.

Tissot’s women, as in his painting, Fashionable Woman are self-confident, however, they do not display enough depth of personality to express the tension between nature and artifice which is seen in Renoir’s images. Tissot’s women often look passive or bored, not as vapid as fashion plates, but without any complexity. This passive look was considered a fashionable way to present yourself in public and it adds to his nuanced approach required to understand his paintings because of its references to bourgeois norms.155 When compared to Renoir’s image of At the Concert, we see that Tissot’s

155 Ibid.
fashionable women lack the allusions to the natural with concurrent moral implications of innocence that give Renoir’s women more complexity and depth.

From the beginning of his career, as mentioned above, Renoir’s paintings demonstrate a tension between fashion and artifice. Though he does not depict a fashionable woman as a mother, like the advertisement, he defies the fashion plate in a way that Tissot does not by giving his women an inner life. After the early 1870s, Renoir abandons images of women directly related to fashion plates but he paints genre/portraits of fashionable women at the theater, like Tissot’s Fashionable Woman. Renoir changes the format by placing the women in a theater box, another form of public display. He has two important images of well-dressed women in theaters: Le Loge (figure 36) from 1874 and At the Concert (figure 35) from 1880. Most of Renoir’s theater images are set in theater boxes as opposed to Tissot’s lobby because the theater was well known as a place where people were interested in watching other people as much as the performance. The image of the theater box was popular in Impressionist painting. The viewer of these paintings is positioned as if he or she were in the theater and is an audience for the women’s display. Renoir’s depictions can be classified as images of the Parisienne because the theater was where women wore their most elegant outfits. Ball gowns were well known for their importance of sexual display because of the fashionable deep décolleté emphasized by the shape of the corset that shapes and supports the bust.

Renoir’s genre scene/portrait with a woman and a girl, At the Concert from 1880, differs from his other depiction of the event, Le Loge, which features a man and woman. The 1880 painting invokes a fashion plate like an illustration from La Mode illustrée

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156 Iskin, Modern Women, 124.
from 1879 (figure 37). We see a similar compositional format of figures placed in the theater box, a condensed space, and lack of interaction amongst the figures. The format in both cases makes the women more monumental and less subservient to their clothing than seen in the previous full-length images. Because of the format in this fashion plate, emphasis is on coiffure as well as clothing, even a mirror is placed in the composition so the viewer can see the women from different angles. The hairstyles in Renoir’s images are much simpler, for he prefers here again to draw attention to the women’s faces, which have portrait features and convey deep emotions. The fashions from the illustration, like At the Concert and Le Loge, show the late-nineteenth century taste for the low neckline, while still conveying the hourglass shape of the corset. The fashion plate does not use the high contrasts of Renoir’s black and white dresses, instead it uses brighter colors. Renoir has an evolving relationship with the Parisienne and modern artifice and he continues to move away from fashion plate images. However, he nonetheless continues to reveal the tensions inherent in modern women’s predicament of being on display because of the conflict between natural and artificial beauty.

In At the Concert, Renoir uses a similar device as in his Parisienne to resolve the tension between personality and costume by having the older woman stare out at the viewer. In Le Loge, Renoir includes a man, who is not looking at his companion but is using binoculars to look up at someone else. The woman in this painting is clearly depressed as she displays herself to the sexualizing gazes of other onlookers.157 In theater boxes, as mentioned earlier, this is especially appropriate because of the emphasis on the display of women’s bodies shaped by corsets. Distel points out that the woman in

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157 Garb, Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France, 156.
Le Loge is not actually wearing the correct clothing for the theater, which suggests Renoir’s discomfort with high fashion and elite spectacles.\textsuperscript{158} While this portrait/genre image depicts his discomfort with artifice, in \textit{At the Concert} Renoir uses the rhetoric of nature to reference innocence and virtue as the inverse of the corruption of women by fashion.

\textit{At the Concert} is important for my project, for I believe it implies the natural world, which Renoir believes is virtuous and beautiful. This is a different depiction of women than seen in Tissot’s women in public. Tissot’s fashionable woman is being adorned and is the center of attention for those around her. His women are nothing more than their fashionable clothing. This is opposed to Renoir who depicts innocent, more virtuous women by contrasting being natural with the corrupting role of artifice. Rousseau explains in his \textit{Discourse on the Origin of Inequality} from 1754, that civilization's rules impose on people’s natures and corrupt them.\textsuperscript{159} This distrust of society became important for natural moral thought in the Enlightenment, which valued innocence as natural and virtuous; this is contrary to Baudelaire’s emphasis on learning or acquiring virtue.

In \textit{At the Concert}, the women are not merely on display but are actually interested in the music, a fact implied by the sheet music they are holding. In this painting Renoir also changes the couple from a man and woman to a woman and younger girl. \textit{At the Concert} originally had a male figure, but the dark curtain covers where he was

\textsuperscript{158} Distel, \textit{Renoir}, 106.

positioned.\textsuperscript{160} Though we are unsure of why Renoir changed it, the effect is an emphasis on the differences between the woman and girl.

The older woman has a smile that seems smug as she leans on her luxurious seat. This relaxed pose and face look complacent according to Tamar Garb’s feminist reading. Garb believes that the woman’s look indicates sexual interest.\textsuperscript{161} The sensuality of the woman is also implied because of the bouquet of roses and the flower in the bodice of the older woman, which are the same color of her cheeks and lips. In Garb’s words, this flower “implies the nude beneath the clothing.”\textsuperscript{162} But Garb calls it more disarming because the viewer is unsure of her relationship to the younger girl.\textsuperscript{163} If the older woman is her mother or chaperone, then it would be strange to depict her as anything but a “femme honnête,” therefore unlike the woman in \textit{Le Loge} or the fashion plate of the theater; this fashionable woman confuses our expectations. In order to clarify the meaning we need to look more closely at the two figures.

Let us look at the girl first. Her attention shifts away from us, she appears almost shy. Garb rightly sees this as implying the girl’s reaction to a sexualizing gaze as it is seen earlier in \textit{Le Loge}.\textsuperscript{164} The girl is wearing all white, a typical sign of innocence and her hair is down, unlike any of the other fashionable women we have looked at. She has

\textsuperscript{160} Distel, \textit{Renoir}, 190.

\textsuperscript{161} Garb, \textit{Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France}, 156.

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 155.
a bouquet of flowers, a sign of youth and beauty. However, although this girl has all the signs of innocence, she is corseted like mature woman. So this is a girl coming of age. Although she analyzes the painting in detail, Garb does not discuss why the girl takes the particularly strong position of her back turned toward the viewer. This is not a coy gesture but a self defense against the uncomfortable gaze, as she turns toward her comfort, her mother.

The mother’s gesture of placing her head on her hand should not be read as complacent, instead it should be read as a pose of thoughtfulness and reflection. The ambiguity of the sexual provocation of the woman is a way to convey some sort of life or vitality, not passive like a fashion plate, but more active and complex. Moreover, I believe her confrontation with the viewer is a sign to the viewer to think about expectations and society’s role: display and fashion can corrupt the innocence and virtue of her daughter. This is further demonstrated if we compare At the Concert to an image by Berthe Morisot which displays a similar theme.

Morisot, Renoir’s friend and fellow Impressionist, used herself and her family as models. She was an ambitious painter who also valued her family life. As noted in the previous chapter, Morisot was most interested in her own experiences of the modern world, so we can see in her paintings an attempt to depict her involvement with modern spectacles. In her depictions, we see Morisot’s attempt to convey something essential

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166 Ibid., 4.
about psychological responses. As a woman artist in the upper class, she was well-aware of the tension between artifice and nature.

In Morisot’s, *Young Woman in a Ball Gown*, from 1879 (figure 38), we see a more detailed depiction of a young woman dressed in the latest fashion with a similar message to Renoir’s *At the Concert*. As in Renoir’s paintings, the psychology of the figure is emphasized. The young woman in the painting is shown in a similar format to Renoir’s theater box images because of the three quarter view of the woman in a small contained space. Like Renoir’s images, she has been shaped by the corset and has the décolleté of a fashionable ball gown. The young woman’s dress is all white with a sash of white flowers that draws our eye to her costume. She is sitting on a couch while flowers encroach the space around her face. We connect her sash and the flowers behind her because of the shared hues. The use of whites and elements of nature as in Renoir’s image shows the girl’s innocence and virtue reflected in colors and symbols around her.

The girl in Morisot’s painting is consumed with nervously looking off to the left of the canvas. Morisot’s painting is the farthest from the fine details of the fashion plates. The sketch-like qualities of Morisot’s style add to the psychological impact of the image, because the figure’s tense look is echoed in the tension created by Morisot’s loose brushstrokes. She appears anxious and nervous in her setting or with our gaze. The girl’s psychology dominates the composition. Because the young woman looks out of the canvas, but avoids acknowledging the viewer, we are made more aware of our own penetrating gaze towards her. As in Renoir’s paintings, Morisot uses the symbols of flowers and nature to suggest the virtues associated with innocence and opposes

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167 Ibid.
fashionable displays. In *Young Woman in a Ball Gown*, Morisot epitomizes the uncomfortable tension that women of the nineteenth century experienced as a result of social appearances and the theatricality of fashion versus who they were as individuals.

Renoir’s most important confrontations with artifice come in his portraits. Portraiture was a way for the new upper-bourgeoisie to assert status, and during much of Renoir’s earlier career he took portrait commissions to provide for himself. Since George Charpentier had bought one of Renoir’s works at the first Impressionist sale of 1875, Renoir had become friends with the Charpentier family. 168 His portrait of *Madame Charpentier and Her Children* of 1878 (figure 39) led Renoir to many more commissioned portraits, mostly of wives and children of wealthy bourgeois families which led him to become financially stable. This work has been talked about since its success at the Salon of 1879. 169 The Charpentier’s were publishers and surrounded themselves with naturalist writers and Republican intellectuals and welcomed Renoir into their circle. 170 For years to come Madame Charpentier and Renoir would exchange letters that often indicate how close they were. 171 It was his personal connection to the Charpentier family and this portrait that allowed Renoir to enter into the upper-classes of

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168 Distel, *Renoir*, 159.


170 Distel, *Renoir*, 159.

171 Ibid.
Despite the portrait’s emphasis on costume, fashion and wealth as signs of status, nevertheless Renoir depicts Madame Charpentier as a natural mother. In this image, Madame Charpentier is presented as a loving mother, affectionately watching over her children. Renoir in this painting uses convincing and complex gazes to convey an overall feeling of sympathy. Madame Charpentier is wearing black and is monumental. The loving gaze of the mother is complemented by her outstretched arms protecting her children, leading us toward the foreground and her children. One child, closer to her mother, watches his older sister who seems distracted, looking off into the distance. We cannot see what she is looking at, but we can see her mischievous and worried look. The girl, in the foreground, just slightly further away from her mother and brother, explores the world in this controlled setting. She sits precariously on the large black and white dog, who is not thrilled by her weight, but is part of the family, like a nanny. The dog’s color echoes that of Madame Charpentier’s dress. The image recalls Rousseau’s naturalistic philosophy of development as put forward in Émile from 1762, which states that children need to find their way naturally, because there is a purity of insight in their experiences. This is not to say that children, especially girls, should be let loose to learn from the world as soon as they can walk, but rather they are watched over by their mother. And this is what we see in Renoir’s

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172 Ibid., 163.

173 There are varying accounts as to whether the child next to Madame Charpentier is her son or her second daughter. According to Colin B Bailey and Linda Nochlin in Renoir’s Portraits: Impressions of an Age, and Anne Distel in Renoir it is Madame Charpentier’s son, Paul.

painting. The girl’s inquisitive look can also be seen as uncertainty at growing up and losing natural innocence.

The dramatic pleasure and tension that we see in this portrait expresses the discomfort and tension in the life of a nineteenth-century French woman. In this portrait there is great emphasis on being fashionable. Madame Charpentier’s expensive black dress was commissioned from the preeminent haute couture designer, Fredrick Worth, because she wanted the latest fashion. Even though her dress is important, Renoir blurs the details as he did in the previously discussed work of art, *The Parisienne*. This allows her dress to be less the focus of the painting than her emotional connection with her children. It is blurred enough to even question if she is wearing a corset, an emphasized detail in most other society images. Renoir inserts only a few slight details that indicate the fineness of her dress. Her children are also well dressed in matching light blue dresses (and this reflects the children’s emulation of the fashionable mother as in the advertisement from *Aux Travailleurs*, figure 33). However, the clothing worn by the family is less important than the emotional qualities of the painting, which is further enhanced by the background of the painting.

The representation of the gold Japanese screens adds to the air of fashionability and wealth of the portrait, but like the fashionable dresses, the details of the interior have been obscured so the Japanese screens form a type of garden of gold. The family within this painted artificial garden recalls the many paintings from the late nineteenth century which show mothers and children in idyllic landscapes. The couch has a floral pattern, which echoes the flowers in the still life, on the righthand side of the composition.

175 Marie Simon, *Fashion in Art*, 147.
Behind the sitters are a number of Japanese screens of peacocks and trees, all idealized natural settings as well as fashionable decor. Woman and flowers have a long association of beauty and nature. But like the garden there is a certain amount of ‘controlled beautiful nature’ implied. So while all the rich decoration of the portrait implies the upper class status of the family it is also coded with rhetoric that is associated with the nature of women and even the pastoral.

If we think about mothers and children in an idyllic garden, we can look again to Morisot who depicts a comparable painting of her sister as the natural mother in a natural setting. In Morisot’s On the Lawn from 1874 (figure 40), we see an idyllic landscape, where the figures are small in the expanse of landscape. It is one of many scenes of domestic life from this period, in this style, that Morisot paints. The details of the woman and children’s costumes are blurred but we can still read the simple indications of class and allusions to status. Morisot emphasizes the emotional content expressed in the relationship of the figures. A mother kneels over a child while another child looks on. The mother seems to be almost protecting the boy from the dog, who proudly stands his ground and likely represents fidelity. The idyllic and sentimental qualities of this family scene are emphasized even though we cannot see the facial features of any of the figures or details in the landscape. This sentimental image of bourgeoisie leisure within a landscape is like new a pastoral of the nineteenth century, one that emphasizes the tender and loving relationship between mothers and children. These paintings with their straight-forward meanings seem to show Morisot’s sympathy and love of her domestic role and because it lacks details that would indicate further any sort of status it may

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176 Some of the others are Chasing Butterflies,(1874), Hide and Seek,(1873) and later Woman and Child in a Garden at Bougival (1882).
indicate her own skepticism of the artifice of fashion. This is the type of scene that Renoir references in his portrait Madame Charpentier and her Children.\textsuperscript{177}

Renoir’s portrait of his patron Madame Charpentier emphasizes her class and status, but like Morisot’s painting of her sister, Renoir depicts Madame Charpentier as the natural mother. The use of an idyllic natural setting, the innocence of the children, the de-emphasis on the clothing and emphasis on the mother’s affection toward her children make this not only Renoir’s career changing commission, but reveals his own belief in the importance of the natural mother.

In Renoir’s paintings of At the Concert and Madame Charpentier and her Children we see the confluence of ideas of nature that Renoir embraced, based on the ideas of Rousseau, and at the same time the artifice of fashion based on the influence of Baudelaire. Renoir’s women in these paintings are natural and domestic but also public and on display.

In the early part of his career, Renoir, therefore, combined Rousseau’s idealization of nature with the notions of artifice and fashion espoused by Baudelaire. In At the Concert and Madame Charpentier and her Children, Renoir found ways to show his emphasis on the natural woman even when she is clothed in artifice.

CONCLUSION

The Goncourt brothers’ writings on the eighteenth century influenced Renoir who shared their interest not only with the motifs of the Rococo, but also the idea of the natural woman that had been popularized by Rousseau. In the first chapter we saw how Renoir chose the aesthetics and emblematic language of the Rococo when he painted direct references to Fragonard’s The Swing and The Music Lesson. Renoir’s love of eighteenth-century French artists is linked to Rousseau’s ideal of the natural woman which characterize his works throughout his career.

Renoir depicted the idea of the natural woman in various ways—most significantly in Portrait of the Artist’s Wife Breastfeeding their Son from 1884, analyzed in the second chapter. This painting showed Renoir as an artist beholden to the ideas of the natural woman and he continued to use this theme as a way to express his own discomfort with fashionable women who were beloved by Baudelaire, but who Renoir believed were prone to corruption by society, an idea dear to Rousseau. His important, complex depictions that engage these themes show Renoir to be not simply a frivolous painter of women who revived the Rococo palette, but a thoughtful artist whose depictions of women convey powerful personal beliefs about their inner nature.

In addition to presenting new perspectives on Renoir, this thesis calls for a reevaluation of the important influence of the Goncourt brothers on the visual arts. I suggest these texts are rich in possibility and should serve as a means of illuminating the effects of the Rococo Revival on nineteenth-century artists. In particular, the Rococo Revival artist Tissot, discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, should be reconsidered in light of the writings of the Goncourt brothers. The Goncourt brothers’ History of
French Society during The Directory\textsuperscript{178} from 1864, would likely reveal new ways of thinking about Tissot’s genre scenes set in this period. Tissot also focuses on women in gardens as seen in his Quiet and women’s society etiquette as in his painting Hush; both types of scenes would be better understood if they were related to Tissot’s interest in the Rococo Revival and the writing of the Goncourt brothers.

The insights presented in this thesis are the results of examining and contextualizing paintings containing only a few figures, but some of Renoir’s most famous paintings are his multi-figured, large-scale scenes from everyday life. These large genre scenes/group portraits include works such as his masterpiece, The Moulin de la Galette from 1876 (figure 2), his later Impressionist experiment, Luncheon of the Boating Party from 1880-1881 (figure 12), and his genre scene The Umbrellas from 1881, reworked in 1885 (figure 41). These paintings also involve the public and private roles of women because they focus on the relationships of men and women in society. The Moulin de la Galette was acknowledged in the first chapter for its relation to the fête galantes of Watteau; the atmosphere of the painting suggests a modern Cythera. The women throughout are dressed in pastel colors with smiling faces and with an emphasis on the play of light. Luncheon of the Boating Party, mentioned in the second chapter because of its inclusion of Renoir’s wife, could be part of Renoir’s thoughts on the developing suburbs of Paris. A still-life of grapes and wine fills the middle of the painting. Almost all of the male figures are facing away from the viewers, and the women’s expressions are emphasized by their gestures. An analysis of this painting might also associate it with the eighteenth century. The Umbrellas is a street scene that

\textsuperscript{178}Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, Histoire de la Société Française pendant le Directoire, Paris: J Clay Impimeur, 1864.
includes the same type of images of women seen in Renoir’s theater images, only located in a city street. Similar to his theater scenes, this painting depicts fashionable spectacle in city life. A number of umbrellas make up the background, and help to focus attention on the figures in the condensed foreground, as he used in the theater box. Renoir uses this large-scale painting to reveal the private lives of nineteenth-century French women which can be seen in his use of costume. The children in the foreground give the painting its only patches of color and suggest their vitality and innocence. The main focus of the work is the woman on the far left who is looking out at the viewer. She is the Parisienne; she gazes out forlornly while wearing the tight, obviously uncomfortable corset. The innocence of the children and discomfort of the woman suggest the interplay of the artificial and the natural, an interplay that informs so many of Renoir’s paintings. This painting and Renoir’s many other depictions of women show his inspiration from Rococo art, his belief in Rousseau’s natural mother, and his distrust of artifice and fashion in late nineteenth-century Paris.
APPENDIX. FIGURES

Figure A1: Renoir, Pierre-Auguste, *The Swing*, oil on canvas, 1876 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris). Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.

Figure A2: Renoir, *Dancing at the Moulin de la Galette*, oil on canvas, 1876 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris). Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.

Figure A5: Fragonard, *Piano Lesson*, oil on canvas, 1769 (Musée du Louvre, Paris). Wiki Commons.

Figure A6: Jan Steen, *The Harpsicord Lesson*, oil on canvas, 1660 (Wallace Collection, London). Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.
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Figure A8: Charles-Nicolas Cochin II, The Frontispiece to *Émile*, engraving, 1762. Wiki-Commons.
Figure A9: Renoir, *The Artist's Wife Nursing Their Son*, 1885 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris). Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.

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Figure A17: Morisot, *The Wet Nurse Angèle Feeding Julie Manet*, oil on canvas, 1880
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Figure A20: Renoir, Second State of *The Artist’s Wife Nursing Their Son*, 1885 (Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida). Wiki-Commons.

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Figure A23: Giorgione, *Tempest*, oil on canvas, 1506. (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, Italy) Wiki-Commons.

Figure A25: Anonymous, Fountain of the Goddess of Regeneration, Festival of Reconciliation August 10, 1793, engraving. chnm.gmu.edu/revolution.

Figure A27: Daumier, The Republic, oil on canvas, 1848 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris). Albert Boime, “The Second Republic’s Contest for the Figure of the Republic,” The Art Bulletin 53, No 1(March 1971), 70.
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Figure A30: Dalou, French Peasant Breast-feeding, terra-cotta sculpture, 1873 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Wiki-Commons.

Figure A31: Renoir, La Parisienne, oil on canvas, 1774 (National Museum Cardiff, Cardiff). Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.

Figure A34: Tissot, *The Fashionable Woman* from *La Femme à Paris*, oil on canvas, 1885 (Private Collection), Wiki-Commons.

Figure A35: Renoir, *At the Concert*, oil on canvas, 1880 (Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA). Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.
Figure A36: Renoir, *La Loge*, oil on canvas, 1874 (Courtauld Institute Galleries, London) Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.

Figure A38: Morisot, *Young Girl in a Ball Gown*, oil on canvas, 1881 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris). Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.

Figure A39: Renoir, *Madame Charpentier and her Children*, oil on canvas, 1878 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.

Figure A41: Renoir, *Umbrellas*, oil on canvas, 1881-86 (National Gallery, London). Madison Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.
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