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2021

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Prolago, Piper, "Adventures in the Drawing Room: The Ambiguity, Exoticism, and Artifice of the Bourgeois Parisienne in Alfred Stevens' The Visit" (2021). *UReCA: The NCHC Journal of Undergraduate Research & Creative Activity*. 83.

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Adventures in the Drawing Room: The Ambiguity, Exoticism, and Artifice of the Bourgeois Parisienne in Alfred Stevens' *The Visit*

Piper Prolago

Alfred Stevens' *The Visit*, housed in the Dallas Museum of Art collection, not only encompasses the aesthetics of the bourgeois decorative, fashion, and artistic tastes in 19th century France, but also captures the artifice of European fascination with Asian aesthetics. *The Visit* depicts two women in a richly decorated interior visually disjointed by a lacquer screen.

One reclines in a chair with a cryptic expression seeming to border on dismay and boredom as she stares at a book on the table; the other, dressed in a shawl and peeking from behind the screen, keeps her back to the viewer. In his carefully ordered composition, Stevens simultaneously illustrates the fantasy and exoticism of the French bourgeoisie tastes while underpinning the scene with a tension and mystery that seems to also underlie the transforming ideals for women in society. By creating a vague space filled with indulgent designs and objects, yet featuring a woman with an apparently bored expression, Stevens articulates a sense of stifled imagination and adventure through the lens of domestic life.

Stevens made a name for himself as a painter of bourgeois lifestyle through his carefully curated interiors and elegant depictions of bourgeois women, frequently drawing on aesthetics and objects from Asia in his approach to building each scene. Many of the artist's works, similar to *The Visit*, are marked by interest in Asian art that arose around the mid-19th century, particularly in France. The woman with her back to the viewer wears a luxurious Indian shawl decorated with paisley, a variation of the Kashmiri buta motif, giving a "hint of oriental luxury" to her outfit.¹ Wearing the shawl, she appears to have either just arrived or prepared to depart.

Adding to the sense of exoticism of the interior, the shawled woman stands in front of a Japanese lacquer screen. Following the forced reopening of Japan to European trade, Japanese prints, textiles, and decorative objects flooded the European market.² Artists including Stevens began to fold these aesthetics into their own works. Stevens himself describes this phenomenon in his *Impressions on Paintings* where he asserts "Japanese art is a powerful element of modernity," continuously praising both the stylistic elements and remarkable skill of Japanese masters.

Historians studying this sensation distinguish between *japonaiserie*, which draws designs or motifs from Japanese art, and *japonisme*, which reflects a "deeper understanding of Japanese principles of design."³ In this, Japanese aesthetics permeated European taste not only through sale of goods like textiles and prints, but also in artistic principles adopted by European artists.

Using this definition, many of Stevens' works exhibit *japonaiserie* in the inclusion of Japanese objects and clothing adorning Parisian homes.⁴ The artist himself amassed a significant collection of Chinese and Japanese art in the late 1850s, which he exhibited in a room dedicated specifically to them.⁵ Paintings like *La Parisienne Japonaise* contextualize Stevens' work in French fashion, highlighting the ways in which his paintings reflected Parisian tastes. In this 1872 painting, a woman gazes at her reflection, dressed in a blue kimono adorned with a white floral pattern and holding a white fan behind her back. Stevens has frequently been cited as an artist who paints Japanese objects rather than one who adopts more formal elements of Japanese art in their own work—that is, working in *japonaiserie* rather than *japonisme*.

However, scholarship surrounding his 1866 painting, *A Duchess (The Blue Dress)* (Fig. 3), hints at an interest in Japanese art extending beyond holding a mirror to Parisian fashion.

Yutaka Mino, Director of the Hyogo Prefectural Museum in Kobe, Japan, noted that the design of the lacquer screen in *A Duchess* was carefully copied from portions of manga made by Katsushika Hokusai, a Japanese artist of the Edo period, reflecting Stevens' fascination with Japanese art.⁶ Yutaka suggested that Stevens intended a level of irony in juxtaposing Hokusai's scene of labor with the sedentary duchess, particularly as her gaze rests parallel to the hay carrier on the screen behind her.⁷ Here, the inclusion of the carefully rendered lacquer screen demonstrates japonaiserie, but extends beyond this; the ironic pairing of hay-carrier and duchess hints that Stevens was not simply reiterating a French scene, but saw Japanese and French cultures in conversation with one another. Further, John House posits in the catalogue entry for the Clark Art Institute, that the use of this screen to "close off legible recession" in the otherwise ambiguous space reflects a similar compositional arrangement that is seen in Japanese compositions.⁸ With this, Stevens' attention to sophisticated Japanese compositional forms reflects an interest in japonisme, rather than just japonaiserie.

Stevens uses the same composition device in *The Visit*, organizing an ambiguous space with another lacquer screen framing the standing woman in a shallow field. The screen divides the frame into two distinct spaces: one with the visitor, clad in her Indian paisley shawl, offset and visually closer to the viewer than the other half of the room unified by the repeated turquoise tablecloth and couch, where the hostess reclines with a pensive expression. Behind the lacquer screen, the room opens into a larger space. However, the small peek viewers are allotted into the background is complicated by a complex layering. The screen covers a majority of the space that is revealed by an opened door, which is outlined by the gold knob and latch extending off the door. Above this door, though, a curtain hangs from the top of what seems to be a doorframe, creating a third layer separating the women from the outside of the room. The space viewers are allowed to see is small, creating a sense of almost cramped intimacy between the two women and voyeurism as the viewer looks in on them.

Within this complexly layered interior, the two women are surrounded by fabricated natural imagery. The carpet, couch, tablecloth, and wallpaper are each embellished with different floral designs. Behind the pensive woman, a landscape painting is prominently displayed, the only decoration on the wall. The single ray of natural light shining in the room misses the seated woman, falling instead onto the book on her table. This disturbance appears to startle the cat at the foot of the table, who looks toward the woman who has just entered, disgruntled. Even the lacquer screen is illustrated with an outdoor scene as the group gathered at the bottom are poised to enter into an open-air arena. Following Yutaka's assertion about the irony in *A Duchess* that arises in the relationship between the duchess and the illustration on the screen behind her, Stevens' inclusion of Asian objects here too may extend beyond aesthetics, mobilizing these objects as a source of meaning outside of decoration. Offset by the lacquer screen, the woman in the Indian shawl appears to bridge the interior of this room, lavishly embellished with fabricated images of nature, with the outside. A visitor, who still wears her

shawl, has either just arrived or just prepared to leave, reminding viewers of the closedness of this space by creating a route to the outside of it.

In the room, the women are surrounded by natural imagery evoking Edenic paradise, as well as indicators of worldliness in the Indian shawl and Japanese lacquer screen. The objects and aesthetics surrounding her reflect a wider Parisian interest in claiming a “minute part of these Eden-like, fascinating and phantasmagoric worlds” by possessing small parts of them.⁹ In this, the two are immersed in the fantasy of adventure in “exotic” and unfamiliar places. In contrast, the seated woman, especially, appears bored and even trapped as she reclines on the couch clutching her forehead. The juxtaposition between paradisiacal and exotic decoration against the apparent boredom of the woman and her guest expose the artifice of the scene, as well as the artifice of the European interest in the art and culture of Asia. Seeking to make themselves worldly by possessing objects and incorporating styles from Asia, the Parisian bourgeois was ultimately only interested in cultivating their own image of high-class status.

Regardless of their interest in global aesthetics, women in the mid-19th century played a distinctly domestic role, acting as “ornament[s] for the men in [their lives]” collecting decorations to embellish the home while themselves becoming embellishments for their husbands and fathers.¹⁰ Responsible for their children’s education, in many ways the interest in “exotic” aesthetics aligned with their confinement in the domestic realm. Relegated to the private (and excluded from the public sphere), 19th century women were unable to vote and had no control over their own earnings, living a strictly regulated daily life.¹¹ Stevens’ own views of the role of women most likely aligned with the traditionally domestic woman as he sought to depict the ideal society women, but the ambiguities and mysteries that underlie works like *The Visit* reveal internal contradictions of these ideals. Simultaneously gripped by the adventurous allure of distant lands and anchored to the home through social expectations, closed off from the outside world while bathed in the aesthetics of Asia, the women in *The Visit* make visible this tension through the ambiguity of the space itself and their actions in this setting.

The subject of *The Visit*, in which a woman entertains another woman in her drawing room, was a frequent theme in Stevens’ works. The practice of these short visits throughout the day was a common one in the daily life of Parisian bourgeois women. Women generally received visitors—usually other women—once a week for a few hours; the visitors would stop in to do things like play games or have tea before moving on to their next visit, but the purpose of these visits was primarily conversational.¹² Paintings like 1870 *The Visit* (Fig. 4) similarly illustrate this theme. In these instances, women were allotted an increased level of agency as they more freely conversed with each other within a space specifically for them. These visits would take place in the drawing room, a “space that is peculiarly hers in bourgeois and aristocratic interiors.”¹³ This ownership is certainly reflected in these two paintings, where the hostess is distinguishable from her guests in her seated position, laying claim and taking control over the room. However, Stevens captures scenes not of playful conversation, but rather more thoughtful, almost awkward, moments. Particularly in the earlier iteration of *The Visit*, the women appear completely silent.

Both seem to stare at the open book on the table, illuminated by the soft glow of light in the room that leaves the two women in shadows, although neither woman's eyes are visible to the viewer. Leaving questions as to the content of the book—possibly a journal or a novel—the moment is filled with ambiguity and boredom despite the intention of these visits centering on these women's entertainment.

Stevens' *The Visit*, on its surface, embodies tastes and fashion of the Parisian bourgeois. Incorporating elements of japonaiserie in the lacquer screen and embellishing the scene with fantasy through the Kashmiri paisley print, Stevens echoes the bourgeois interest in all things exotic. However, in the ambiguity of the scene and its spatial arrangement, *The Visit* is also underpinned with a sense of tension. Despite the lavish decoration of the scene incorporating several forms of natural imagery, the women are ultimately confined to the interior of the room. While surrounded with the fantasy and adventure of global travels in a moment dedicated to their own free conversation, they find themselves bored, anchored to the domestic sphere where, despite the intimacy of the small space and the unfolding scene, they are still on display to viewers.

By interrogating contradictions such as these, viewers might read Stevens' body of work and other works imagining mid-19th century women beyond its correspondence to historic reality and the aesthetics of luxury. Instead, in the tensions *The Visit* evokes, the work hints at dissonances in the ideals that society women aspired to. Upholding the expectation for women to be simultaneously domestic and worldly requires an artifice which is not painted over in Stevens' enchanting images. Rather, these tensions shine through with recognition that ambiguities are crucial in sustaining these ideals in reality.

End Notes

1 Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard, *Ornament: a social history since 1450* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 191.

2 Gabriel P. Weisberg, "Aspects of Japonisme," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 62, no. 4 (April 1975): 120.

3 John House, "A Duchess (The Blue Dress)" in *Nineteenth-century European Paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute*, ed. Sarah Lees (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2012), 755-756.

4 Alfred Stevens, *Impressions on Painting*, trans. Charlotte Adams. (New York: George J. Coomers, 1886), 21.

5 Sarah Lees, "Alfred Stevens and the Arts of Asia," *The Burlington Magazine* 157, no. 1342 (January 2015): 16.

6 *Ibid.*, 14.

7 *Ibid.*, 14.

8 House, "A Duchess," 757.

9 Danielle Derrey-Capon, "Bourgeois Exoticism: the Woman Staged," in *Alfred Stevens: Brussels, 1823 - Paris 1906* (Mercatorfonds, Brussels: Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 2009), 153.

10 Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siecle France* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 4.

11 Jean-Claude Yon, "Culture and Society in Alfred Stevens's Paris," in *Alfred Stevens: Brussels, 1823 - Paris 1906* (Mercatorfonds, Brussels: Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 2009), 63.

12 *Ibid.*, 65.

13 *Ibid.*, 65.

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