

Commodifying the Female Body: Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, and the Visual Politics of Sex Work  
in Third Republic France

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In the chaotic aftermath of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the collapse of the Second Empire, the emergence of the Third Republic marked a period of significant transformation that lasted from 1870 to 1940. This era was characterized by political upheaval, burgeoning consumerism, and concerns about urban morality. Central to the transformation of the urban landscape was the Haussmannization of Paris, a comprehensive urban renewal project that not only modernized the city but also significantly altered its social dynamics.<sup>1,2</sup>

Under this renovation, prostitution became more visible and ingrained in city life, emerging as a "central feature of the urban sexual economy."<sup>3</sup> The omnipresence of sex workers, operating within both regulated and unregulated frameworks, highlighted deep-seated societal tensions. The bodies of sex workers epitomized moral decay and vice, and became the center of wider societal fears, challenging traditional class boundaries and symbolizing the consumer revolution. As Paris morphed into a modern metropolis, the commodification of sex reflected and fueled the complex web of desire, economics, and social stratification, creating widespread social tensions and anxieties.

The art world was not immune to the evolving pressures of the era. The Salon, a prestigious and official French art showcase, faced challenges throughout this period. Many artists began to rebel against the conservative art world, creating new styles. This shift was

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Tilburg, "Gender, Politics, and Literature in The Second Empire," Class Lecture, Davidson College, February 16, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Haussmannization was an extensive public works program commissioned by emperor Napoleon III and spearheaded by Georges-Eugène Haussmann. It completely transformed the city of Paris, destroying medieval neighborhoods, displacing the poor, constructing wide avenues, parks and luxury buildings. This urban development created an environment for capitalist consumer culture to flourish. With a growth in the bourgeois middle class, and the creation of department stores, consumer culture overtook the Parisian metropolis. Shopping became an experience, with access to many goods and targeted marketing. Women typically participated in consumer culture through shopping for goods in department stores, especially buying clothes. However, men participated in consumer culture through soliciting sex from prostitutes. Therefore, along with the rise of consumer markets, came the rise of position, with prostitutes' bodies exemplifying bourgeois male consumerism.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Israel Ross, *Public City/Public Sex: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 216.

mirrored in depictions of prostitutes, largely inspired by Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863).<sup>4</sup> Prior to this time, prostitutes were depicted in a highly stylized and non-realistic manner, separating the viewer from the harsh realities of their profession. Frequently, these included anatomic inaccuracies, with more focus on the aesthetics than naturalism. Prostitutes were often depicted in two ways, either as exotic and erotic—enticing the audience through sensuality—or as romanticized tragic figures, evoking sympathy, and melancholy.<sup>5</sup> However, Manet's painting *Olympia* was groundbreaking and extremely controversial, due to both its artistic technique and subject matter.<sup>6</sup> The portrait centers a nude woman, Olympia, reclining on a bed, gazing directly at the viewer with a confrontational and self-assured expression. Her nakedness and other details hint that she is a prostitute, but this work muddles clear class distinctions. Her ambiguity underscores how prostitutes blurred class lines, interacting with people from various social strata. This painting breaks away from typical depictions of prostitutes through realistic anatomy, Olympia's direct gaze and unapologetic pose, and the starkness of her nude figure.<sup>7</sup> The humanist style, combined with Olympia's facial expression invites the viewer to question morality, sexuality, and prostitution.

Manet's revolutionary work catalyzed the shift towards Impressionism, a contemporary artistic movement that focused on depicting the modern world. French artists, Edgar Degas and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec frequently worked with prostitutes as their subjects, drawing

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<sup>4</sup> Figure 1.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Sexton, "Inside the Brothel: Depictions of Prostitution in 19th Century France," TheCollector.com, Jun 13, 2021, <https://www.thecollector.com/19th-century-brothel-french-impressionism-paintings/>.

<sup>6</sup> The artistic style of *Olympia* (1863) contributed to its radicality. Manet utilized loose brushstrokes, contrasting with the Salon expectation of perfect, tight, and undetectable brushstrokes. He also painted with a lack of depth, creating a flatness to highlight Olympia's body. This technique was novel and inspired later Impressionist and modernist movements. Moreover, Manet's harsh lighting and drastic colors created a stark visual, contributing to the realism of this painting. The combination of these techniques shocked the art world, inspiring new artistic styles to develop in popularity.

<sup>7</sup> Rosie Lesso, "What Was So Shocking About Edouard Manet's *Olympia*?", TheCollector.com, Aug 26, 2022, <https://www.thecollector.com/what-was-shocking-about-manets-olympia/>.

inspiration from Manet's *Olympia* (1863). Despite stylistic differences, both artists painted prostitutes in realistic, non-idealized manner, portraying the conditions of their profession. Through the works of Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, I argue that the artistic shift in depicting prostitutes as realistic rather than highly sexualized reveals the commodification of female bodies. This increased visibility of the realities of prostitution intensified social anxieties about the modern city, especially regarding female sexuality and the blurring of class distinctions.

Numerous scholars have explored how France responds to social anxieties surrounding female agency, sexuality, and their bodies. Lynn Hunt's work reveals how the political pornography of Marie-Antionette responded to fears about women during the French Revolution. Marie-Antionette was extremely sexualized and vilified in print media. She was represented as a monster, a sexual predator, a bad mother, a lesbian, and a participant in bestiality. These depictions were reactions to "a fundamental anxiety about queenship as the most extreme form of women invading the public sphere."<sup>8</sup> Just as revolutionaries in the late eighteenth century feared Marie-Antionette's power, the Third Republic feared the power of prostitutes, and envisined them as a disease, invading the city with vice. These anxieties are evident in the widespread negative rhetoric and in the artistic oversexualization of prostitutes' bodies, which serves to alienate them from everyday life and dehumanize them. Furthermore, in both eras, efforts to regulate female sexuality were used as a means to exert social control. This is illustrated by Marie-Antoinette's trial and execution, as well as the establishment of governmental regulatory systems for prostitutes during the Third Republic.

Moreover, this fear of female power, represented through a fear of female sexuality, continued after the Third Republic in the Vichy regime. Miranda Pollard examines how the

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<sup>8</sup> Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette," *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, (1991): 131.

regime promoted traditional motherhood roles through propaganda to support the nation and aimed to "erase the potency of female desire."<sup>9</sup> The Vichy regime's approach to controlling women was a more extreme manifestation of these longstanding fears, yet it was clearly rooted in the same social anxieties that had repeatedly surfaced in French history. This underscores the historical and ideological continuity in efforts to regulate and suppress female sexuality in France, reflecting broader patterns of gender control and repression. Situating my research within the framework of longstanding French societal concerns about female bodies, I will investigate how transformations in artistic portrayals of prostitutes revealed the commodification of sex inherent to the profession. Furthermore, I will examine how, rather than alleviating fears, these shifts in artistic approach heightened them through a strikingly novel style of representation.

Scholarship on both consumer culture and representations of prostitutes in art offers essential context to properly analyze my primary sources. Ruth E. Iskin's work explores the role of women and consumer culture through Impressionist-era paintings, focusing particularly on modern middle-class women. This approach provides a foundation from which I can examine the shifting artistic portrayal of prostitutes in relation to the commodification of their bodies. Additionally, Leslie Choquette studies images of prostitution and homosexuality during the Third Republic, looking at their role in heightening societal fears. However, Choquette does not explore the consumer nature of prostitution, providing an opportunity for me to develop my own interpretations. Grounding my analysis in the context and broader societal anxieties that these historians highlight, I will examine how the artwork of Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec represent a shifting art movement and the commercial aspects of prostitution.

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<sup>9</sup> Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 70.

Edgar Degas, born in 1834 to a middle-class family, had formal artistic training, rooted in classical traditions.<sup>10</sup> He showed a few history paintings in the Salon during the 1860s, but was unsatisfied with his results. Inspired by his friends that painted in the realism style, Degas shifted his style of art to depict elements of contemporary French life, such as horse racers, ballet dancers, and prostitutes. Many of his peers began to paint *en plein air*,<sup>11</sup> but Degas created many monotypes inside *les maisons close*, the brothels of 19-century Paris. Monotype is a print making technique where artists draw on a metal plate then press the image onto paper creating a single print. This method allowed Degas to experiment with movement, create mixed media, and rapidly produce many small prints.<sup>12</sup> Monotypes became a fundamental aspect of Degas' oeuvre,<sup>13</sup> and although he participated in Impressionist exhibitions, he shunned artistic labels, viewing his work as similar to realism, focusing on depicting modern life.<sup>14</sup>

In the mid 1870s, Degas created dozens of brothel monotypes, each slightly different but depicting prostitution in a contemporary way. Inspired by Manet's *Olympia* (1863), Degas portrayed prostitutes in a realistic manner, reflecting the gritty realities of their daily lives. *Waiting for a Client* (1879), a charcoal and pastel monotype on paper, exemplifies this artistic shift.<sup>15</sup> This scene depicts the commercialization of sex: three prostitutes waiting for the next client in a brothel. The three women are portrayed in various postures of rest and readiness,

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<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Brown, "Degas, Edgar," in *Europe 1789-1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of Industry and Empire*, edited by John Merriman and Jay Winter, 633-636. Vol. 2. Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006, *Gale eBooks Reference Library*.

<sup>11</sup> This translates to "in plain air" in English. This term describes the practice of painting outdoors in the natural light.

<sup>12</sup> Heidi Hirschl, "Lasting Impressions: The Monotype Medium from Edgar Degas to Elizabeth Peyton," Moma.org, May 27, 2016, [https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2016/05/27/lasting-impressions-the-monotype-medium-from-edgar-degas-to-elizabeth-peyton/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/05/27/lasting-impressions-the-monotype-medium-from-edgar-degas-to-elizabeth-peyton/).

<sup>13</sup> This term refers to the entirety of an artist's body of work, taken as a whole.

<sup>14</sup> Roberta Smith, "The Modern Degas You Haven't Seen," NYTimes.com, Mar 24, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/arts/design/the-modern-degas-you-havent-seen.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Figure 2.

suggesting a routine familiarity with their situation. The client is a dark, nondescript figure who is partially visible and edged to the periphery of the frame. This placement contributes to a feeling of the imminent yet impersonal nature of the transactions that occur within these walls. Moreover, the two women facing the customer seem to be “encouraging the man to make a choice between the two of them without waiting passively to be noticed, without too much professionalized enticement, and without the appurtenances of a falsely heartfelt seduction.”<sup>16</sup> The women are not over-sexualized, instead the focus of this work is on their state of waiting, portraying an authentic brothel scene. Their collective state of waiting is apparent through their languid body language and apathetic facial expressions. This monotype challenges viewers to consider the lives of these women, their passive waiting interspersed with moments of transactional exchanges, exposing the commodified essence of prostitution.

Another work of Degas, *The Serious Client* (1879), a monotype on wove paper highlights the class dynamics inherent in prostitution.<sup>17</sup> This work illustrates a brothel scene, with a visible male client and four prostitutes. Following the artistic shift, none of these sex workers are erotized, rather their bodies are realistic and anatomically correct. One prostitute is holding hands with the client, however her back is turned, depersonalizing her individuality. This position creates disconnect between her and the viewer, reflecting the detached nature of her future sexual exchange. To the sex worker, the client is simply a way to make money, and to the client she is simply a means to attain pleasure. The man, presumably “the serious client” stands on the right side of the scene. He is well dressed and wearing a hat, appearing to be a member of the bourgeoisie. The ambiguity of his body language—either an assertive lean suggesting power

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<sup>16</sup> Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Figure 3.

or a tentative posture indicating hesitance towards the prostitutes—adds complexity to the scene. Regardless of how the man presents, this monotype ironically plays with class dynamics, depicting a bourgeois man who seeks sexual services from lower-class women, simultaneously showcasing his moral ambiguity and ethical decay.

Edgar Degas's monotypes provide a nuanced portrayal of prostitutes in 19th-century Paris, focusing on the everyday and intimate rather than the overtly sexual or moralized depictions common prior the Third Republic. Prostitutes served as a “a symbol of modern life in the capitalist metropolis,” their bodies exemplifying the intersection between the economy and social ideas.<sup>18</sup> With a focus on the mundane, Degas challenges viewers to engage with his scenes as more than just aesthetic experiences, but a contemplation into the realities of prostitution. In *Waiting for a Client* (1879), Degas concentrates on body language and the act of waiting, communicating the indifference and resignation of these women. This underscores the routine and commodified nature of their work, emphasizing that their sexual interactions are occupational rather than lascivious. In *The Serious Client* (1879), the interaction between a bourgeois man and multiple prostitutes serves as a critical examination of the capitalist consumption of bodies. This scene can be interpreted as a commentary on how female bodies are subject to economic exchange, pointing to a broader critique of the consumer revolution overtaking the Parisian metropolis, replacing moral behavior with a desire to consume. Moreover, this work explores how prostitutes, despite their lower social origins, interact with clients across social classes, blurring traditional class distinctions and illustrating the permeability of societal boundaries through economic exchanges.

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<sup>18</sup> Lesile Choquette, “Degenerate or Degendered? Images of Prostitution and Homosexuality in the French Third Republic,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 23, no. 2 (1997): 205.

French artist, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec depicted prostitutes in same humanistic way, as Degas and Manet. Toulouse-Lautrec was born in 1864 to a wealthy family in southern France.<sup>19</sup> He traveled and studied art, learning from many renowned artists. He was very accomplished from a young age and an extremely involved in nightlife culture, especially drinking. This led to close relationships with many of his subjects, Parisian prostitutes, as “for the better part of two years [1893-1894], he actually lived in brothels, alternating between two luxurious establishments on the rue des Moulins and the rue d’Amboise.”<sup>20</sup> Toulouse-Lautrec displayed the depravity of modernity in a distinctive colorful way but cites Degas as someone “whom he valued above all other contemporary artists and by whom he was most influenced.”<sup>21</sup> His paintings explore authentic experiences of sex workers, from downtime in the brothel to government enforced regulatory checks.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s oil painting, *Au Salon de la rue des Moulins* (1894), provides a glimpse into the dismal world of nineteenth-century prostitution.<sup>22</sup> It portrays several prostitutes, sitting in various poses in the salon of a brothel. Their facial expressions display resignation, fatigue, and indifference. The painting is candid and unglamorous, devoid of eroticism. It realistically captures an ordinary, unidealized moment in the lives of these women. By emphasizing their natural forms and postures, the focus is on their humanity, not their occupation. Moreover, this painting highlights the isolation felt among the women, stemming from the nature of their work. Despite being physically close, each woman appears lost in her own thoughts, conveying a sense of detachment that is both collective and individual. The

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<sup>19</sup> "Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec," in *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed. Vol. 15. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2004, *Gale eBooks Reference Library*, 173.

<sup>20</sup> Choquette, “Degenerate or Degendered?,” 213.

<sup>21</sup> Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec," in *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 173.

<sup>22</sup> Figure 4.

painting dignifies the prostitutes by neither depicting them with erotic enthusiasm nor imbuing them with melancholy. It reflects the ambiguity of the setting without judgment from Toulouse-Lautrec, highlighting his approach to portray sex workers as complex individuals with emotions.<sup>23</sup> This painting reveals the complexity of the human condition within brothels.

Toulouse-Lautrec also painted *La Visite: Rue Des Moulins* (1894), depicting a medical examination, a mandatory element of life as a registered prostitute.<sup>24</sup> In a response to social fears about prostitution, the government initiated “police registration of prostitutes and licensing of brothels in order to track and enclose women who sold sex, combined with regular medical examinations to prevent the spread of venereal disease.”<sup>25</sup> The painting centers two women, standing with their clothes lifted, awaiting a medical examination while a dark shadowy figure in the background, likely the doctor adds an ominous presence. These women are depicted as individuals in their profession's circumstances, rather than as objects of desire or subjects of moral judgment. However, the vulnerability of the women is evident, treated not as human beings with emotions and rights but as commodities—bodies to be inspected and regulated to ensure they are fit for their roles as sex workers. This realistic lens highlights the challenges of this work along with the commodification of female bodies for male pleasure. Moreover, the women appear disengaged and introspective, especially the blonde woman, whose posture and expression reflects weariness and perhaps the degradation of her daily reality. The clinical setting and the presence of a doctor further emphasizes the transactional nature of their lives, regulated by external forces. Through this painting, Toulouse-Lautrec reveals the invasive nature of these medical exams, highlighting the objectification of prostitutes.

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<sup>23</sup> Tom Gurney, “In the Salon of Rue des Moulins by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec,” TheHistoryofArt.org, Jun 19, 2020, <https://www.thehistoryofart.org/henri-de-toulouse-lautrec/in-salon-of-rue-des-moulins/>.

<sup>24</sup> Figure 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ross, *Public City/Public Sex*, 13.

Drawing from Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec's *Au Salon de la rue des Moulins* (1894) and *La Visite: Rue Des Moulin* (1894) portray the challenges and complexities of sex work in the Third French Empire. *Au Salon de la rue des Moulins* (1894) depicts the women in natural, authentic poses, highlighting their humanity over their profession without judgement. *La Visite: Rue Des Moulin* (1894) captures women awaiting a routine medical examination, a government intervention to regulate and control female sexuality which reveals the clinical nature of this interaction and the commodification of bodies.

Together, the works from Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec mark a transformative phase in the artistic representation of prostitutes. Both artists explore the humanity of prostitutes by realistically portraying their bodies, work, experiences, and challenges. Through this authentic perspective, the commodification of women's bodies in sex work becomes apparent. However, this increased visibility also amplifies broader social fears and anxieties. Prostitutes "sold the very objects of bourgeois anxiety as a source of pleasure."<sup>26</sup> Though they represented all that the bourgeois feared: degeneration, moral decay, vice, and lust, their bodies were also consumer goods for the bourgeois. The profession of prostitution was sustained by "the persistent demand of the male client."<sup>27</sup> This irony was exposed through the Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec's art, which only intensified these societal concerns. Each painting reflects a different element of prostitutes' experiences, Degas' *Waiting for a Client* (1879) and Toulouse-Lautrec's *Au Salon de la rue des Moulins* (1894), epitomize the solitary periods of waiting for client, highlighting the commodified nature of bodies in sex work Degas' monotype, *The Serious Client* (1879), emphasizes the hypocrisy of bourgeois men. Despite widespread anxiety about the power of

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<sup>26</sup> Ross, *Public City/Public Sex*, 187.

<sup>27</sup> Anthea Cullen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method, and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 40.

prostitutes to transcend class divides through their sexuality, bourgeois men consistently solicited lower-class female sex workers, initiating the class mixing. Moreover, Toulouse-Lautrec's painting, *La Visite: Rue Des Moulins* (1894) represents a culmination of these fears - and how the regulation system - developed to address anxieties was extremely ironic. The existence of regulation institutionalized and sanctioned prostitution, as a legitimate and necessary industry. Moreover, only the women, not the men participating in sex were checked for venereal diseases, revealing the limitations of protecting public health. These practices also objectified the women, exploiting their bodies, and treating them as less than human. Through their art, Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec exposed the contrast between societal perceptions of prostitutes and the economic reality of their bodies as sites of bourgeois consumption. This visibility amplified social fears and anxieties, confronting the viewer with the uncomfortable truth about the double standards of sexuality and morality in French society.

Appendix:

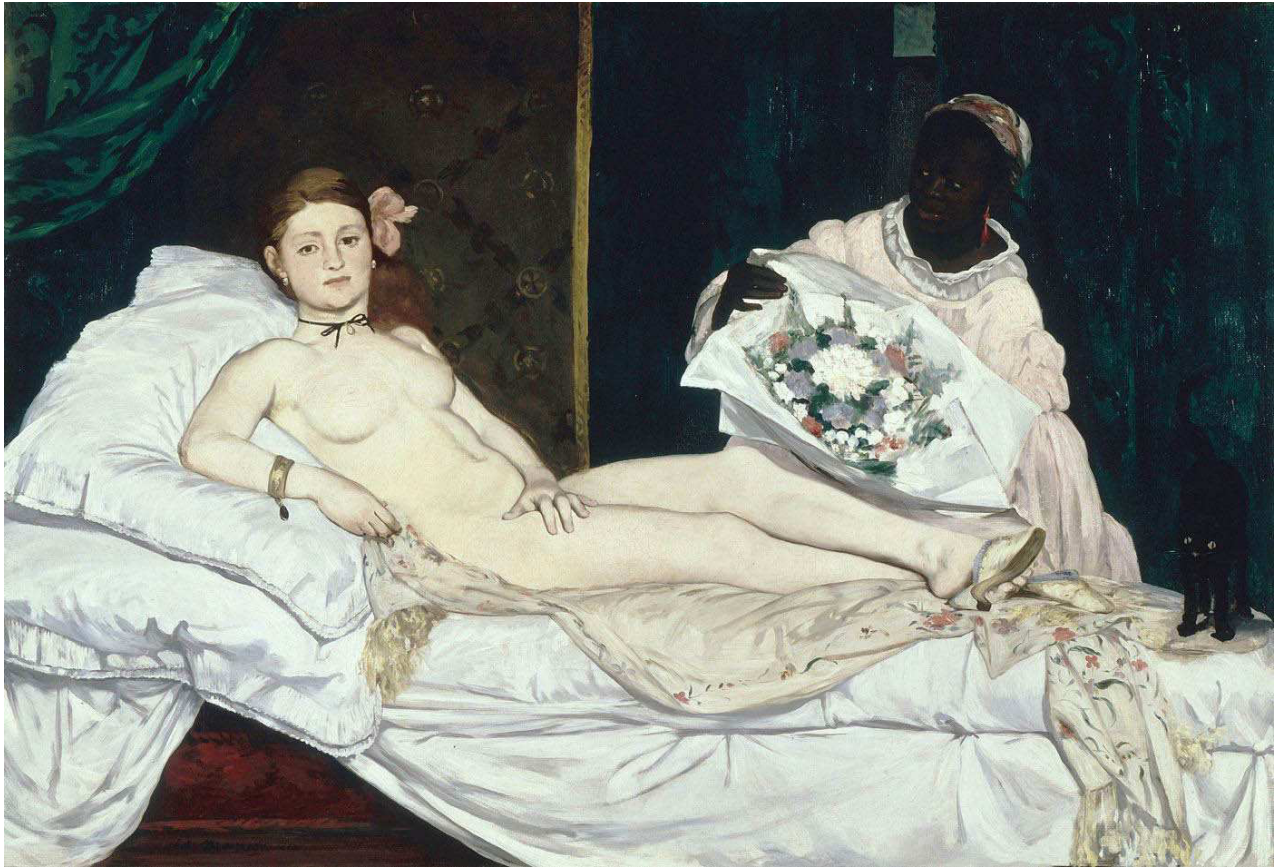


Figure 1. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, Oil on Canvas, Musée d'Orsay

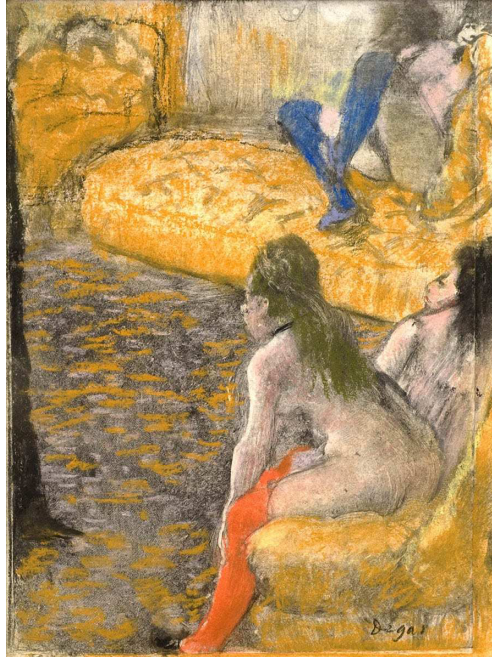


Figure 2. Edgar Degas, *Waiting for a Client*, 1879, Charcoal and Pastel Over Monotype on Paper.



Figure 3. Edgar Degas, *The Serious Client*, 1879, Monotype on Wove Paper, National Gallery of Canada.



Figure 4. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Au Salon de la rue des Moulins*, 1894, Oil Painting, Musee Toulouse-Lautrec.



Figure 5. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *La Visite: Rue Des Moulins*, 1894, Painting.

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