



Book Reviews

***Interior Portraiture and Masculine Identity in France, 1789–1914,*
by Temma Balducci,
Heather Belnap Jensen, and
Pamela J. Warner (eds)**

Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011,
260pp. 24 color and 36 b&w illustrations.
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Reviewed by Joseph McBrinn

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In 1906, from a bedroom at 102, boulevard Haussmann and then 44, rue Hamelin, in Paris, Marcel Proust began writing the various volumes of *A la recherche le temps perdu*. As a relatively commonplace type of domestic space this small room, now reconstructed in Paris's Musée Carnavalet, is as revealing of Proust's interior psychology as the celebrated 1892 portrait of the writer, aged twenty-one, by Jacques-Emile Blanche, which Proust kept until his death in 1922 (now in the Musée d'Orsay). Indeed, it is the spatial rather than the visual record of the writer that has prompted some of most fascinating writing on Proust, from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualization of the "epistemology of the closet" to Diana Fuss's discussion of "the writer's room" as a site of Freudian "repression and resistance" (Sedgwick 1990; Fuss 2004). A new book, edited by three American

academics, aims to reconsider further the relationship between interiority and portraiture, specifically of men, produced in France roughly from the French Revolution to the Great War.

The book's basic contention is that although there exists an "overwhelming number of portraits of men in interior spaces" analysis and interpretation of such images and their role in the mediation of modern masculine identity "are limited" (p. 1). The dozen authors included in the book demonstrate how interiority, and more especially the domestic interior, was very much part of the visual representation of masculinity in France from the late eighteenth century onwards. This book, the editors claim, makes "a much needed contribution to the examination of how the visual arts played a significant role in shaping, reinforcing, reflecting, and also contesting, undermining and flouting predominant ideas about masculinity in circulation" in France's long nineteenth century (p. 4). Indeed, as one of the editors states:

we should entertain the possibility that art works dealing with interior spaces and everyday life had even more relevance to the defining of bourgeois masculinity than the state-sponsored public displays of male virtue featured in the idealized grand machines of the Salon. (p. 41)

The choice of portraiture, at the expense of the more material aspects of visual culture relevant in analyzing the production and consumption of interiors seems idiosyncratic but is justified in that portraits offer a form of cultural production that play on "the fragile and shifting boundaries of public and private lives, [and thus] proved to be the ideal genre in which to explore the engaging trajectories of French men, set into the context of emerging paradigms of the modern" (p. 19). The editors argue that masculinity's location within the public sphere is an oversimplification and the rise, and significance, of the private interior as a site of social, cultural, political, and ultimately subjective and sexual identity politics needs further interrogation. To support this they take a wide typological view of the private interior including, perhaps surprisingly, "the studio" or *atelier*, recasting it as a new "hybrid interior space" in that it fused the private and personal with the public and professional and became "just as important to artists than the streets of Paris" (p. 3).

Not surprisingly, such revisionism returns to the boundary breaking discourses of Feminism, which often, itself, in terms of art and design history, returned to Paris as "the cradle of modernity." One source consistently cited in the volume is Griselda Pollock's influential essay, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" (1988), which revealed the complex patterns of resistance and subversion in the use of interior spaces by women artists of the Impressionist circle (Pollock 1988: 70–127). The editors, however, seek to expand Pollock's argument that interior space was crucial to modernity by

considering the highly coded representations, and changing nature, of modern masculine identity in France (p. 5). However, in her discussion of post-Revolutionary imagery of men as domestic subjects, Heather Belnap Jensen admits there is perhaps some “danger of overstating the ubiquity or uniqueness of ‘male trouble’” in purely linear and semiotic terms (p. 34).

To tackle what seems like a rather monolithic ideological framework of modern masculine identity the twelve chapters are tightly focused on a range of portraits of men, some famous, some not so, drawing on painting, photography, printmaking, and sculpture – and attending to the various tropes and assumptions of the physical, as well as cultural, verisimilitude such likenesses invite. Each chapter interrogates masculinity as located in domestic space, enabling the authors to breakdown prevailing notions of masculine identity/identities, at various historical moments, as being neither “stable or fixed” (p. 3). The range of approaches draws upon an array of historiographical and methodological resources and all chapters, to varying degrees, engage with the evolving discourses of masculinity studies.

Amy Freund and Heather Belnap Jensen explore the issue of paternalism in the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods, paying particular attention to the shifting meanings of *paternité*, through analysis of portraits “rehabilitating the father figure” (p. 7). Portraits of fathers were variously juxtaposed with sons, as symbols of “patrilineal inheritance and political continuity” (p. 19), and with daughters, as signs of modernizing “active paternalism,” which Freund and Jensen postulate is evidence of the increasingly overt political potency of such imagery (p. 34). New notions of the interior and its conflation with internal mental states are explored by Jennifer W. Olmstead through Delacroix’s lost *Portrait of Charles de Mornay and Anatole Demidoff* (1832), by André Dombrowski in his analysis of Edouard Manet and Paul Cézanne’s portraits of Emile Zola, and also through interrogation of the practices of commercial photographers, by Laurie Dahlberg, which saw men presented as effeminized subjects by mere relocation to domestic spaces.

In looking more at men as consuming subjects, Pamela J. Warner considers the significance of the cultural paraphernalia of men’s *cabinet de travaux*, and Heather McPherson reconsiders the role fashion played in the construction of interiors, and identities, for artists such as Gustave Courbet and Edgar Degas, a line of thinking that is further developed in Alison Strauber’s analysis of the studios of Frédéric Bazille and Pierre-Auguste Renoir as “depicting all-male artistic communities through the lens of bourgeoisie domestic ideals” (p. 130). This is followed by an interesting chapter by James Smalls, perhaps the most engaged in the discourses of masculinity as a distinct discipline, which reconsiders a little-known painting, depicting the Revolutionary martyr *Jean-Paul Marat* (1880) by Lucien-Etienne Melingue. Unlike Strauber’s hesitant elimination of Queer Theory as a

tool to untangle the complexity of masculine identity, Small engages with it as a further way to unpick the theoretical ideas embedded in the painting. There follows the final chapters on individual artists, the Swede Anders Zorn, and the gargantuan French figures of Auguste Rodin and Henri Matisse, by S. Hollis Clayson, Natasha Ruiz-Gomez, and Temma Balducci respectively.

Collectively, the chapters add up to a convincing argument that representation of masculine identity mediated through domestic interiority is an area of nineteenth-century art that has, to some degree, gone largely unexplored. Unlike a great deal of edited volumes of essays the thinking, and approach especially, here is tight, which makes this a cohesive read. This is carried through in the visual uniformity of the book with its numerous black-and-white and color images, which are elegant, if a bit modest, for such an expensively priced book. Overall, the volume succeeds in making a significant contribution to art and design history and the wider discourses of the interrelationship of masculinity and the interior.

References

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Eileen Gray and the Design of Sapphic Modernity: Staying In, **by Jasmine Rault**

Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. 184pp.
with illustrations. HB 978-0-7546-6961-6. \$99.95.

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Although Eileen Gray would not have conceived of herself as a feminist heroine, Jasmine Rault's *Eileen Gray and the Design of Sapphic Modernity: Staying In* is part of the same lineage as Kate Zambreno's important work of feminist literary criticism *Heroines* (2012), in which she resurrects and rewrites the wives and muses of modernist (male) writers. In her book, Rault paints shades of Gray and reveals something of an enigma: Gray was extremely private, but had a

wide social circle in the Left Bank neighborhood of Paris; she was reticent about her own design and architectural work, but hyper-conscious of the ways in which modernist architecture could not meet her needs; she experienced same-sex desire, but would not have described herself as a lesbian. Rault's *Staying In* contributes to a range of fields, including design history, architectural history, literary criticism, communication studies, and Sapphic modernity studies; this is truly an interdisciplinary project. The book will also make a significant impact in the field of what I would call radical decadence studies, a field that examines the work of women artists and writers in terms of decadence and non-normative sexualities. Drawing on texts by feminist scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Jo-Ann Wallace, and, especially, Bridget Elliott, Rault argues that "decadence" served as an emancipatory approach not only to creative work but also to lived experience for Gray and her circle of "female sexual dissidents" living in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. Although Rault is not the first to make this argument – she indicates her indebtedness to Elliott – her discussion of Gray's lacquer screens, interior design, and architectural works advance the argument through close study of Gray's oeuvre and the rich, albeit limited, available archival sources pertaining to Gray.

The vast majority of writing on decadence, both in the nineteenth century and more recently, has focused on male writers and artists such as Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde. Richard Gilman's analysis in *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (1975), for instance, is limited to men. Since at least the late nineteenth century, the term "decadence" has most often been used pejoratively and frequently as a coded term for non-heterosexuality, but usually in relation to male same-sex desire. There were those in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who – despite, or perhaps because of, the negative connotations of the term "decadence" – actively embraced the concept as a strategy for self-fashioning. Martin Green (1976) discusses how young men in Britain after the First World War reappropriated Wildean decadence as a way of rejecting their father's generation. Bridget Elliott, by contrast, has published several articles regarding non-heterosexual women artists' relationship to decadence, and Rault draws fruitfully on this scholarship. Both scholars have made major contributions to advancing the study of decadence in relation to women artists and designers who lived outside the bounds of heterosexuality. Rault argues that these "female sexual dissidents," a phrase that she favors over "lesbian" because the latter term would not have been recognized or used by Gray and her circle, employed "decadent aesthetics" to create design objects, homes, and interior spaces that critiqued modernist architectural principles such as clarity, purity, and communicability. As Rault observes: "women artists and writers were strategically appropriating elements of by then archaic nineteenth-century decadent aesthetics as means for imagining female same-sex desire – as an

aesthetic strategy” (p. 17). Although Rault’s arguments regarding Gray’s use of decadence are convincing throughout the book, it would have been advantageous to engage more extensively with the literature – both primary and secondary – that has been written on decadence, particularly because of the slippery and problematic nature of the term itself. As Gilman observes, at the end of the nineteenth century, there “was no decadence but merely a word for what was not understood, and actions taken, gestures made, in the space that the word concealed” (p. 140). I would have liked to see Rault address this argument. I suspect that she might agree with, and indeed find useful, Gilman’s suggestion that epithets such as “decadence” “paper over the holes in our existence while claiming to fill them in” (Gilman 1975: 138). It is crucial to understand that those reviewers who were “confused and disturbed” by Gray’s “too rich” style (quoted in Rault, p. 31) were likely associating her work with so-called decadent (male) artists at least in part *because* of this confusion and disturbance. Further to this, by acknowledging and critiquing non-feminist texts on decadence that focus solely on men, such as those by Gilman and Green, Rault’s discussion would have illuminated the significance of feminist scholars’ use of decadence as a critical framework. This approach would have strengthened the already-strong first chapter in which Rault reads Gray’s architecture in terms of “decadent perversions.”

In Chapter 2 Rault discusses Gray’s early lacquer screens in relation to both Romaine Brooks’s paintings of female nudes and “decadent” artist Aubrey Beardsley’s graphic works that he created for Wilde’s play *Salomé* (1891). As Rault demonstrates in her sustained critique of previous scholarship on Gray, the latter’s lacquer screens have been sinfully under-discussed in the literature because of the hierarchy that has long positioned architecture above design. In the subsequent chapter Rault reads Gray’s first built house E.1027, completed in 1928, against Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which was charged with obscenity because of its representation of female same-sex desire. In Chapter 4 Rault compares Gray’s extremely private residence Tempe à Pailla (1932–4) with Djuna Barnes’s notoriously opaque novel *Nightwood* (1937). She argues that:

Gray’s strategy of resistance to publicity and a certain kind of communicative clarity, so central to modern architecture, are comparable to the narrative strategies of Djuna Barnes ... whose life and aesthetic works were similarly resistant to reductive communicative clarity. (p. 127)

All of these discussions are intricately argued and utterly convincing.

Pleasure was central to Gray’s designs. Gray herself commented that individuals needed spaces where their desires, pleasures, and needs could be met. Photographs of her homes show glasses,

ashtrays, reading lamps, and pillows, all suggestive of corporeal, sensuous pleasures: the erotics of design. Rault's subtitle, "Staying In," is the opposite not only of "going out," but also of "coming out." Gray was desirous of creating interior spaces where she and her intimates could imagine and self-fashion themselves as non-heterosexual women. "Staying In" also evokes one of life's great pleasures, that of staying in with a good book. In looking so closely, so *intimately*, at Gray's creative works, Rault has produced a book that provides its reader with a series of (vicarious) pleasures, not the least of which is reading Rault's brilliant discussion of a woman who deserves further critical attention from future queer and feminist scholars. This reader looks forward to Rault's next book, which she alludes to briefly in her acknowledgments.

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