Ateliers d’artistes (1898): an advertorial for the ‘lady readers’ of the Figaro illustré

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the text and imagery of an article entitled ‘Ateliers d’artistes,’ a series of studio visits conducted by the critic François Thiébaut-Sisson in 1898 and published in the Figaro illustré. The series is interesting for a number of reasons, but most importantly because the author makes an explicit appeal to the female readers of the magazine. This appeal is set in the context of the construction of women as consumers (in this case, specifically as consumers of art) and female readership of the illustrated press, and analyzed as an early form of ‘advertorial,’ designed to encourage women to purchase the work of the artists visited. At the same time, the series serves to further the commercial interests of the painters discussed, and to consolidate certain stereotypes surrounding the artist’s studio.

KEYWORDS

Belle Époque; women consumers; artist’s studio; portrait photography; art criticism; illustrated journals

Introduction

In May 1898, just before the opening of the Salon, Paris’s annual exhibition of contemporary art, the monthly Figaro illustré published a long article entitled ‘Ateliers d’artistes’ describing a series of visits to the studios of some of the most famous and fashionable artists of the day, written by the critic François Thiébaut-Sisson (1898a, 1898b). The text was complemented not only by color lithographs of works by the painters in question, but also by photographs showing them in their working environments. In principle, this was nothing new: similar articles – generally accompanied by engravings after drawings made on the spot or after photographs – had appeared in the popular press since at least the 1850s (Esner 2013, 2012a, 2012b). Two things, however, make this particular publication remarkable. In the first place, it is very likely the first time that half-tone reproductions of actual photographs of artists’ studios were presented integrated into the text. It was now technically possible to reproduce such images without the intervention of the engraver’s hand, thanks to the new and rapidly expanding use of rotogravure. Secondly – and uniquely in the realm of the studio visit in mass-media publications – the series is addressed to a specific – and gendered – audience. As Thiébaut-Sisson (1898a, xvi) writes in his ‘Préface,’ the dozen
brief ‘studies’ that make up his article had been sketched with the aim of presenting the interiors of Paris’ chicest studios ‘à nos lectrices’ (‘to our lady readers’). In what follows, I will contextualize and interpret the critic’s at first glance perhaps somewhat surprising appeal, framing it not within art-historical discourse, but rather within the ongoing socio-historical research into the extent and meaning of bourgeois-female consumption in late nineteenth-century France.¹ The series may shed new light on the relationship of the average bourgeois woman – the typical reader of the Figaro illustré – to the high-art market, a topic which has previously remained underrepresented in both art and social history, due undoubtedly to a lack of documentation.

The Figaro illustré was a magazine designed for a cultured but general bourgeois audience with, as I will show, a reputation for serving the commercial interests of those it wrote about. In this context, we should understand the series not as art criticism – which it resembles neither in tone nor content (even though its author, Thiébault-Sisson, had an excellent reputation as an art critic²). Instead, I believe it should be regarded as what we today call an ‘advertorial,’ addressed specifically to the consuming female reader, who then might exercise her aesthetic judgment by acquiring a work by one of the artists discussed in the article. Given the place of publication, however, we should interpret the form of consumption promoted not as collecting in the common sense,³ but rather in the light of what was understood to be one of the primary tasks of women in the late nineteenth century: the care for and decoration of the home as an expression of herself and the status of the family. What role might this series have played in the period’s construction of women as consumers, in this case specifically as consumers of art? What kind of verbal and visual rhetoric was employed to ‘train’ them in choosing the ‘right’ works for their purposes and to make them feel confident and comfortable entering, if only in an ad-hoc fashion, an art world dominated by men? How does it nuance our understanding of what kind of objects women were being encouraged to view and buy? And, finally, is there a parallel to be drawn with other types of publications produced in this period that sought to encourage women to develop their taste and cultural interests – publications which served an emancipatory, if ultimately politically conservative, function (Mesch 2013, 1–23; Silverman 1992, 198–206; Tiersten 2001, 4)?

Constructing the aesthetic consumer

Much has been written in recent years regarding the forging of French women into consumers from the Second Empire onwards and the gendered nature of different consumptive practices. Auslander (1996, 79–112) has given a concise description of the role of the bourgeois female consumer over the course of the century. In the first instance, Auslander writes, her task was to consolidate her family’s status through the purchase of quality goods, mainly for the home. From about mid-century onwards, she was additionally expected to support the nation by consuming (only) objects made in France and to promote national values and taste both through her acquisitions and her general adherence to all things French in matters of art and culture (Tiersten 2001, 3–7). By the end of the century, another charge had been added: consumption in the name of self-expression. As Auslander (1996, 96) writes of the period around 1900: ‘The home was now a woman’s canvas, and furnishings were her palette. Through the interior she constructed, a woman could (and should) express her individuality, her personality, her taste, and her quality.’ Tiersten (2001, 7) sees this as the era of ‘marketplace modernism […]’ defined by the exercise of taste in everyday life as much more than the passive
appreciation of beauty, casting the expression of individual aesthetic sensibility even in the mundane acts of consumption, as an active, creative, and even artistic enterprise.’ The woman consumer is herself seen as a kind of artist, the commodity as an art object, and the marketplace as an artistic arena.

By the end of the century, the interior had become a forum for self-actualization and identity formation – a means of propagating what Tiersten (2001, 89–120 and 150–184) calls ‘aesthetic individuality.’ Decorative-arts objects and furniture, in particular modernized updates of classical and national styles (Tiersten 2001, 150–184) judiciously chosen by the housewife herself (rather than by a professional decorator as in the past) and arranged according to her own meticulously cultivated taste, could serve to fulfill all the above-mentioned missions at once. The development of women’s taste and aesthetic sensibility was thus widely discussed in this period. Above all, aesthetic self-hood could be expressed though the enhancement of the traditional female relationship to art and culture. Bourgeois women had always been expected to sketch and sing, for example, but by the end of the nineteenth century they were being encouraged to integrate artistic pursuits into their daily lives (Tiersten 2001, 112–115). This demand extended to an engagement with the fine arts (i.e. painting and sculpture) as well.

As a consequence, women were not only stimulated to visit museums, the annual Salon, and the smaller art shows organized by private Parisian social clubs – but also to turn their houses into (modest) showcases (Tiersten 2001, 114). An article in La Mode pratique, for example, described the home of Madame Octave Feuillet, wife of the novelist and dramatist, as follows: ‘Her personal quarters and the drawing room where she holds receptions are museums, feminine museums without the vanity of the collector’ (Etincelle 1892, 111). Likewise, writing in La Nouvelle Revue, de Réville (1899, 766) noted that ‘every living room aspires to be a little Louvre.’ An illustration in Moniteur de la mode (no. 48, 1882), for example, shows two stylishly dressed women in an equally stylish drawing room admiring an apparently just-purchased sculpture on a pedestal. The idea seems to be that the bourgeois salon of this period should be a kind of studio or museum, even if the furnishings were otherwise entirely domestic.

The eclectic and above all modest nature of the acquisitions in this realm indicate – as the description of Mme. Feuillet’s salon shows – that although one can legitimately speak of a ‘curated’ interior, what is being aimed for is not the formation of a collection per se. It would thus be a mistake to think of the bourgeois women addressed in the magazines and pamphlets of the time as ‘collectors,’ even if they did purchase (large-scale) paintings and (small-scale) sculptures for their homes. In accordance with the domestic handbooks and the popular press, their acquisitions always remained at the service of the interior as a whole. In the late nineteenth century, men remained associated with the producers of high art, with connoisseurship and the gathering of objects to form a rational and intellectually coherent ensemble – i.e. a collection – while women were mainly linked with the passive consumption of art and were seen as ‘mere’ purchasers of goods – albeit of high-quality and aesthetically sound (Tiersten 2001, 117). A woman’s power in this position should not be underestimated, however: through her cultural pursuits and ‘aesthetic lifestyle,’ she was seen as maintaining an important dimension of French life that many believed was threatened by capitalism, rampant consumerism and modernity (Tiersten 2001, 117–119). In the case of the Figaro illustré series, she could also be conceived as helping to maintain the traditions of the French School, then under siege
due to the consolidation of the avant-garde and their gradual acceptance into the mainstream art market (Patry 2015; Gache-Patin 1997; Distel 1990; Gee 1981). As Impressionist art in particular became the purview of foreign buyers, it grew ever more imperative to maintain and develop a broad middle-class market for more conventional, yet nationally important, painters and pictures. What better way than by appealing to the ‘lady readers’ of one of France’s most popular publications?

**Women readers and the illustrated press**

As one can glean from the above, words and images were of crucial importance in the construction of French women as (aesthetic) consumers. While etiquette, advice and household manuals abounded, there was also a growing role for the (illustrated) press, advertisements and posters, which together constituted ‘a visual discourse of consumption, through iconography and modes of address’ (Iskin 2007, 17). The origin of the word ‘magazine’ in *magasin* already indicates the strong ties between these new publishing formats and the rise of (female) consumerism (Gruber 1996, 3).

As Planté and Thérenty (2001, 1443–1465) have pointed out, due to their social circumstances, women readers approached the press rather differently from their male counterparts. Most of their reading took place at home (and not in cafés, which were the purview of men), meaning they were more likely to be avid readers of subscription publications such as the illustrated journals and supplements. This indicates that bourgeois women entered the world of the press not as citizens or voters – the intended audience of newspapers – but as consumers, looking mainly for pleasure and education rather than news and politics (Planté and Thérenty 2001, 1449). As Gruber (1996, 3–8) has shown, little distinction was made between what was written in the journals’ articles and what was being sold in the ads placed in these new, often explicitly female-oriented publications. The two fed into each other, with advertisers depending on editorials and stories that often employed metaphors or allegories for the consumer experience. Illustrated magazines were designed in such a way as to encourage browsing for items of interest in a fashion similar to browsing the new department stores – an analogy also made by Stéphane Mallarmé with regard to newspapers (Mallarmé 1945, 376). The idea was that the reader could easily shift her attention from one level of meaning to another, breaking off the perusal of a story to look at the ads and then return to the text – a multifocal practice that clearly parallels the actual act of shopping (Gruber 1996, 3–8). Nonetheless, although reading magazines was indeed a leisure activity for women, these publications also regarded themselves as a kind of ‘trade press’ for the housewife, keeping her abreast of developments in her ‘field’ (Gruber 1996, 172) and her special duties as a consumer. As I will show, all of these strategies were employed in the *Figaro illustré* series, itself an ‘advertorial’ that encouraged its *lectrices* to consume on several levels what was on offer in the artist’s studio.

**The *Figaro illustré* in context**

The *Figaro illustré* was the most prestigious, luxurious, reputable and durable of the many illustrated supplements launched by the leading French newspapers from the
1880s onward (Bacot 2005, 163), and cannot be understood apart from its parent paper, *Le Figaro*. The latter had its roots in the *presse boulevardier*-tradition of the Second Empire, and it always maintained the light, informative, and tasteful tone Hippolyte de Villemessant had introduced when he acquired it in 1854 (Lenoble 2010, 47–63). Although by the late 1890s it undoubtedly belonged to the category of ‘quality newspapers,’ the *Figaro* was famed not so much for its political reporting as for what might be called its ‘society’ or ‘gossip’ pages (Lenoble 2010, 62). With rubrics such as ‘Notes d’un Parisien,’ ‘Le Monde et la Ville,’ and ‘A travers Paris,’ one of the paper’s main aims was to apprise its readers of *faits divers*. A very popular column was undoubtedly the *Échos*: brief literary descriptions of small but *mondaine* events such as exhibition openings or gala dinners that were not significant enough to merit a longer treatment, but were important to the paper’s readers (Blandin 2007, 73 and 62–63; Bravard 2010, 163–178). The hallmark of the *Figaro*, however, was the *Chronique*, which treated various subjects and events with the idea of informing but also amusing the reader: from the literary salons to the goings-on at the embassies and first-hand reports from the corridors of power. These latter were penned by well-known writers such as Albert Wolff and Jules Claretie, who were also among the paper’s art critics. These columns, together with its cultural reports and serial novels, made the *Figaro* the newspaper of choice for those who wished to remain *au courant*.

Closely linked to its emphasis on *mondanité* was another feature of the paper, namely its intertwining of advertising and editorials. As early as 1874, Sampson (1874, 605) could write: ‘*Le réclame* is at present an important feature of French journalism. It generally pays all parties concerned in its manufacture, and its existence is therefore likely to continue for long. The reader has only to pick up *Le Gaulois, Le Figaro*, or any of the other Parisian lighter papers, and he will be enabled to see for himself to what extent commerce has infected the Gallic press.’ ‘Editorial publicity,’ whose purpose was to convey information about a product without openly letting the reader know that what they were perusing was actually an ad (at least not until the very last line), was characteristic of the French press in general throughout the nineteenth century, but of the *Figaro* in particular (Zelden 1980, 165; Hahn 2010, 5–7). Moreover, from the beginning, the *Figaro*’s editors exhibited a talent for attracting advertisers – they were the inventors, for example, of the *petite annonce* (Blandin 2007, 66–67) – and throughout the paper’s history they were constantly devising new means of generating revenue through advertisements, many of which could be described as ‘disguised’ (Lenoble 2010, 51–52). An advertising manual of 1883 recommended the *Figaro* as the best place for all kinds of promotion, as it was read by bankers and capitalists (Mermet 1883, 620–621; Hahn 2010, 167). A similar guide published in 1901 noted that the *Figaro* was universally recognized as the best and most profitable venue for advertisers, as it appealed to the wealthiest and most elegant readership (Blandin 2007, 64).

More than just simply advertising products, however, the *Figaro* was known for ‘advertising’ people, and it is in this light that one needs to understand its emphasis on the Parisian world of celebrity and fashion. In his memoirs, Villemessant makes no bones about his paper’s inclination towards what Lenoble (2010) calls ‘*publicité redactionnelle*,’ noting that he had conceived the *Figaro* as a place where ‘more or less everyone gets a chance to talk about themselves’ (1878–1884, 34). So-called ‘puff pieces,’ in which journalists would write about the well-known, or those who simply wished to be, were a common feature of nineteenth-century journalism, and here, too, the *Figaro* took the lead (Hahn 2010,
164–165; Zeldin 1980, 170–172). Such ‘advertorials,’ as one would call them today were predominant. This was especially the case with the Chronique columns, although the advertising quality remained rather implicit (Zeldin 1980, 165). As George-Lespinasse Fonsegrive noted in 1903: ‘One is never sure, except when an article appears over the signature of a few names, and they are very few indeed, that one is not reading an advertisement, a piece of advocacy for which the paper has been paid and often for which both the author and the paper have been paid’ (quoted in Zeldin 1980, 175).

To whom, however, were these ‘advertorials’ directed? Recent scholarship has uncovered much about the nineteenth-century French newspaper consumer, particularly about the reading habits of women. Newspapers had always been aimed at and read by men, but already in the 1860s some publishers began to view women of the aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie as potential clients. Accordingly, they began to seek ways of attracting them, creating publications that would appeal to both sexes. Once again, Villedessant’s Figaro was a trendsetter: it was light, piquant (but not overtly provocative), insinuating, and always within the limits of ‘good taste’. Its mix of cultural and art reporting, articles on fashion, and society pages all made it ‘appropriate’ (according to the norms of the day) for female as well as male readers of the so-called cultivated classes (Martin 1997, 79; Bravard 2010, 163–178). In the years 1875–1894, under the editorship of Francis Magnard, the amount of reporting on the arts in general and on the fine arts in particular increased exponentially, promoting the Figaro from a predominantly political force to a cultural one (Blandin 2007, 62). In 1894, Arsène Alexandre became the paper’s arts editor. Having one’s own arts editor had previously been the privilege of the elite press; now it became part of the bourgeois press, too (Blandin 2007, 69).

Already by the end of the Second Empire, however, the Figaro’s emphasis on social events and gossip led to it being associated with a female readership (Nord 1998, 229). As the chronicler of Parisian journalism Dubief (1892, 222) expressed it in 1892: ‘Political or learned papers address themselves only to the man (…); the illustrated journal is aimed at women (…).’ While the daily newspapers sought to appeal to men and women alike, they also created supplements targeted at specific audiences and the illustrated supplements were directed towards women. The Figaro illustré fits well with this pattern, and one can safely assume that it, too, sought its audience explicitly among upper class and bourgeois women, who were considered synonymous with the family in general. The announcement of its launch in 1883 reads as follows: ‘Every month, the Figaro will bring out its luxury publication, the Figaro illustré, edited by the most renowned writers and illustrated by the most celebrated artists. The Figaro illustré’s aim is to “please and entertain”; it is, moreover, designed to appeal to the whole family’ (Avenel 1901, 238).

**Visiting the artist’s studio with Thiébault-Sisson**

Thiébault-Sisson’s appeal to his ‘lady readers’ is thus not as surprising as it might seem, in fact, it may be read as a ‘sales pitch.’ By referring to the female audience as ‘nos lectrices’ (emphasis added), and adopting the tone and style of writing of women’s magazines in general, Thiébault-Sisson creates an affinity with both the publication and with its community of (predominantly women) readers (Mesch 2013, 38–42). His strategy is thus distinct from articles directed at (male) art lovers and readers of
Salon reviews, addressing instead those with a special, if unspecified, interest in the ‘chic’ artist’s studio. In the manner of the fashion and lifestyle magazines, the author evokes the fashionable character of the upcoming exhibition and its attendees: opening in ‘the most exquisite of the Parisian seasons, in the spring, at a time when our stylish women are showing off, outdoors even, the delicate color palette and frills of their end-of-April dresses’ (Thiébault-Sisson 1898b, xiv). Evoking the Salon’s long tradition and the enduring and preeminently French nature of the art shown there (Thiébault-Sisson 1898b, xiv), the critic is clearly addressing the stylish and aesthetically oriented woman on the lookout for works of art that will be both an expression of her personality and appropriate to her duty as guardian of French taste. This is further underlined by the choice of artists visited: all but three were members of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, and all painted in what can be characterized as modern variations on traditional styles and genres. Although relatively unknown today, readers in 1898 would be familiar with their works from the Salons as well as from coverage in the illustrated press. Like many painters of their time, they had undoubtedly begun their careers with the ambition of becoming state-sponsored executers of large-scale narrative and historical paintings. However, with the development of the market for domestic-sized pictures, increased competition, and the gradual withdrawal of the state from the art world since the end of the Second Empire (Mainardi 1993; Green 1987a, 1987b), by the 1890s all but one (Jean-Léon Gérôme) were predominantly known as portrait, still-life, or decorative painters. They were the kind of artist a haute bourgeoisie women would be likely to turn to for a portrait of herself, her husband or her children, or for a work as decoration for the home, which would equally fit seamlessly in her tastefully arranged interior.

In keeping with the Figaro tradition Thiébault-Sisson’s article employs the light, detailed and anecdotal tone for which the paper was so famed, including the occasional slightly risqué tale about the painters and their models or the artists’ search for the perfect nude (Thiébault-Sisson 1898b, 86, 92, 94). The artists are presented as true celebrities and their studios as either locations to which only the privileged (like the author) have access (Thiébault-Sisson 1898b, 88, 95, 96, 98–99), or as social spaces where the beau monde gathers (Thiébault-Sisson 1898b, 92, 95, 99). Jean-Jacques Henner, for example, is said to never permit visitors while working, and even during breaks ‘one needs to know a whole gamut of Mason’s signals’ to gain entry to the studio (Thiébault-Sisson 1898b, 88). Marie Lemaire, the reader learns, has a ‘horror of the curious, of being seen in her studio cooking up [cuisine] a portrait of one of our Parisian beauties or one of her more serious works’ (Thiébault-Sisson 1898b, 95); Léon Bonnat’s abode is an ‘intimate museum forbidden to the uninitiated’ (Thiébault-Sisson 1898b, 96); while the author has been acquainted with Pierre Puvis de Chevannes for more than a dozen years and can assure the reader that his studio door is usually closed to everyone but his favorite color-merchant (Thiébault-Sisson 1898b, 99). A case in point, and one which links closely with the presentation of other kinds of female luminaries (writers in particular) in women’s magazines of the period (Mesch 2013), is that of the portraitist and flower painter Marie Lemaire. Visiting her, Thiébault-Sisson had hoped to learn something about her painting technique, but his visit happens to fall on her jour de réception. Her artist’s tools are out of sight, and instead of a discussion about art, the critic is treated to a panoply of pretty dresses that bedazzle the ‘jeunes gens du dernier bateau’ who populate
her salon (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 95–96). The author’s writing style invites the reader to imagine the scene and, in a sense, to project herself into it.

An aura of exclusivity is also emphasized in the descriptions of the studios, which are almost invariably luxurious and welcoming, containing a profusion of artworks, tapestries, *bibelots* and houseplants – such elements must have been familiar to the reader from fashion magazines and decorating manuals. As such, they connect the lifestyle of the artists with that of the readers to whom the article is addressed. The studio of François Flameng (Figure 1), for example, is described as follows: ‘He has the intuition and sensibility of a man of the world; he is made, more than any other artist, to understand and fix on canvas the true features of contemporary elegance. The women who come to him to be painted find the proper setting for their beauty; in those intimate spaces they can give themselves over to the illusion that they are in their own drawing room and one of the charms of their likenesses is the feeling of being at home that they project’ (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 99).

Not only are the artists themselves treated as celebrities, so, too, are their sitters. If the aim is to create a sense of identification and arouse desire among the readers, it is no wonder that the series opens with a photograph of the studio of one of the most famous portraitists of the day, Léon Bonnat, painting one of the most famous women of the day, the operatic soprano Rose Caron (Figure 2). The photograph depicts Bonnat pretending to be in the process of completing the portrait, a representational strategy

![Figure 1. François Flameng in his studio. Published in Fr. [François] Thiébaut-Sisson, ‘Ateliers d’artistes.’ *Le Figaro illustré* (May 1898, vol. 98, 97). Courtesy University of Amsterdam. Photograph by Nanda de Groot.](image-url)
typical of this type of studio photograph: not only is his model not in costume – the portrait shows her in the title role of Ernest Reyer’s *Salammbô* of 1890 – the artist is not really painting and the picture is actually finished and already framed. The article further features a reproduction of a profile portrait of Caron, dedicated to the composer by the artist which demonstrates Bonnat’s credentials and network (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 93). Jules Lefebvre, too, is shown ‘at work’ on a portrait of a prominent contemporary, the Belgian liberal politician and famed botanist, Oswald de Kerchove de Deuterghem (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 86).

In the article, Thiébaut-Sisson employs various verbal tactics of persuasion. Like any good ad-man, he establishes his legitimacy by emphasizing his expertise, but also by repeatedly noting his intimate relations with the subjects under discussion, thanks to which the artists show him even their most unfinished sketches and chat away to him during his visit ‘like (an) old friend’ (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898a, xiv). He even shares revelations of the artists that, so he states, they would never have told anyone else. Henner, for example, always turns his canvases to the wall when receiving visitors, but for Thiébaut-Sisson and his photographer he made an exception (Figure 3) (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 88). Gérôme, the reader is told, had refused to exhibit his bust of Sarah Bernhardt, but fortunately for the reader, it appears at the far left in the photograph (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 94, 88).

Moreover, the author presents himself as well-acquainted with the artists’ practice – evidenced by the highly detailed descriptions he provides of their painting techniques.
The emphasis on the comfort of the studio for potential visitors also belongs to this modus of establishing trust, making of the studio a place where a bourgeois woman has nothing to fear—despite the ambivalent reputation artists generally enjoyed. The overall effect is of the reader being treated to a private tour, much as art dealers arranged exclusive viewings for their female customers (Verlaine 2013, 25–26). The critic acts as a kind of guide and consultant, introducing his readership to the ‘right’ artists and the ‘right’ objects for their delectation and purchase.

Thiébaut-Sisson’s account is supported by the visual rhetoric of the photographs and reproductions of the artists’ work, mostly portraits of stylishly dressed women, adorable children, and fashionable genre scenes. As for the photographs, Thiébaut-Sisson describes them as ‘the most intimate snapshots’ (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898a, xiv), implying spontaneity and artlessness. Gérôme, for example, is photographed turning away from the easel towards the camera, as if the viewer has interrupted him (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 88). Such effects of course had to be carefully planned. Due to technical
limitations, each photograph had to be meticulously posed and lit, and it is clear that
every object has been arranged for the camera. The artists themselves obviously pose as
well: brushes and palette in hand, some seem to be captured ‘at work,’ while various
clues indicate to the alert observer that this cannot be the case. Marie Lemaire is
photographed with a paint-box used for working outdoors and does not look at her
‘model’ – a strategically placed bouquet of flowers, while Albert Besnard stares absent-mindedly into the distance (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 91, 94). Moreover, even if not
dressed in their ‘Sunday best,’ several of the artists – Benjamin Constant, Puvis de
Chavannes, and Guillaume Dubufe (Figure 5) – are clearly not wearing their working
clothes (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 91, 96). Yet, in the combination of word and image,
a certain naturalness is suggested that is meant to produce a sense of intimacy, of being
in on a secret and truly in the presence of these artists, privy to their inner sanctum: the
studio, which is the crucible of creativity.

The implication is that everything on display is within reach of the female reader/
consumer. Prominent in a large number of photographs are (life-size) portraits of fashion-ably dressed women: Bonnat (Figure 2); Henner (Figure 3); Carolus Duran, where the sitter
appears with her children (Figure 4); Besnard; and Flameng (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898a, xiv, 1898b, 94). The same is true in the reproductions (Lemaire, Flameng) (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 91). Even where there is no painted portrait, it is clear that the artist is a specialist in
representing the stylish and famous – *vis* Gérôme’s bust of Sarah Bernhardt (Thiébaut-
Sisson 1898b, 88). In one photograph (Figure 5) the identification-figure is not a painted
woman, but a customer who has come to watch the artist ‘at work’ on a portrait of her children in his magnificent studio (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 101). The artists are surrounded
by specimens of their work, demonstrating their talent in various other genres as well, from
decorative paneling to religious and historical painting (Gérôme, Flameng, Figure 1, Puvis,
Dubufe, Figure 5) (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 88, 96). Most of the paintings are of a size and
scale suitable to the domestic interior. Even the occasional unfinished work or sketch is
shown – a device one finds in other kinds of photographs designed with advertising appeal,
such as the studio-portrait series of Edmond Bénard (Wat 2013) and the *Nos contemporains
chez eux* photographs of Dornac (Emery 2008; Mallard 1999; Emery 2012). Undoubtedly,
some of these works – in particular the nude and semi-nude female figures seen in the
photographs of the studios of Lefebvre, Henner (Figure 3), Gérôme, and Carolus Duran
(Figure 4) (Thiébaut-Sisson 1898b, 86, 88), or the historic figures and battle scenes visible in
the images of Flameng (Figure 1) and Gérôme (his statuette of *Napoleon entering Cairo* can
be seen in the sculpture studio) – might have been of more interest to the male collector. 
Nonetheless, the emphasis appears to be on the female presence in the studio and on
appealing to the potential female customer.

The photographs not only teach the reader what good taste is; they also reproduce – and
thus reinforce – modes of looking from the broader realm of female consumption. With the
paintings clearly face forward, arranged to be taken in at the first instance all at once, and at
more or less the same distance from the camera, the vantage point suggested is that of the
shop or gallery window as they might appear to a passerby. Each picture within the picture is
clearly legible, the canvases hardly overlap; the artist’s ‘wares’ are thus spread out before the
reader’s eyes in a manner reminiscent of the direct address Iskin (2007, 17) has noted in
posters and advertisements of the period, as well as in Impressionist painting. The empty
foreground creates a space for the reader to literally enter the studio, where she is welcomed
by the artist, standing at the ready and with a comfortable chair for her to pose in (Figure 1). In their careful inclusion of items of decorative art and furniture, the studios not only reflect the bourgeois interior but also the showroom; the spaces on display are mostly neat and tidy, and may well be the artists’ ‘show studios’ rather than the place they actually worked. This, again, belongs to the fiction that these photographs provide access to the artist’s most intimate realm: what we do not see is the disorderly, dirty and experimental side of artistic practice. The works, even the sketchiest ones, are presented as commodities ready for consumption.

**Conclusion**

I will now return to the question of the construction of women as (aesthetic) consumers at the end of the nineteenth century and the role of the *Figaro illustré*’s series in this process. As I have shown, in line with the *Figaro’s* generally entertaining and ‘adver-torial’ approach to the worlds of art, culture and celebrity, Thiébaut-Sisson adopted language and techniques designed specifically to appeal to the female reader as consumer. His tone is both educational and amusing – precisely what women readers were thought to appreciate and, moreover, which was believed to be the best manner to stimulate their interest in particular types of products. The critic’s aim was to encourage his *lectrices* to engage with art and artists, to learn about their personalities and their techniques, and to feel special and privileged in doing so. The ‘products’ with which she
is confronted in the series are both eminently fashionable and eminently national in style – examples of the good (*haute*) bourgeois taste that was assumed to be her own.

The layout of the series, with images embedded in the text, encourages a type of reading analogous to browsing in the department store: the reader switches between word and image and in the process becomes acquainted with the artists, their styles and their variety, all the while being invited to imagine herself in the role of sitter or client. Equally, she is encouraged to browse in the individual images themselves. Throughout she is constantly being asked to identify with what she reads and sees: with the studio and its furnishings, with the *beau monde* who frequents them, and with the women depicted in the portraits. While the words arouse her curiosity, give her an aesthetic education, and create a feeling of specialness and intimacy, the photographs show her what she should be buying for decorating her home in order to express her own sense of fashion, as well as her family’s status. By presenting the studio as the reflection of (or model for) her own household, Thiébaut-Sisson creates an atmosphere that allows the reader to comfortably imagine commissioning a portrait or buying small-scale works that would fit well with her domestic interior and which she might regard not only as the creative expression of the artist, but also of herself, all the while helping to preserve the great French artistic tradition.

In addition to adding a new dimension to the construction of the female consumer at the end of the nineteenth century, the *Figaro* series also indicates a specific aspect of
middle-class women’s relationship to the art market. For one thing, it shows that women were indeed being encouraged to not only attend fine-arts exhibitions but also to acquire fine-arts objects and even visit the artist’s studio themselves to that end. This aspect of female consumption clearly requires more research, but the series suggests that their engagement with the art market was greater than previously thought. In fact, as attention shifted more and more to what scholars have come to define as modern art, the bourgeois female consumer might have been considered the salvation for artists working in conventional styles. Even if the women ‘only’ bought for the sake of domestic decoration, they represent a potentially important economic factor for art dealers and the painters who had once been the glory of the French School.

The *Figaro illustré* and Thiébaut-Sisson’s series in particular certainly functioned in much the same way as other magazines of the period that proposed a particular model of female consumption for the modern age. In this model, which is inherently conservative or at least stands in sharp contrast to the more radical notion of the *nouvelle femme*, women were encouraged to exercise a certain autonomy in the marketplace. This cannot but have had an emancipatory effect, even when the taste it encouraged was not adventurous at all, never going beyond the acceptable.

The series thus participates in the ideology of the time that encouraged women’s autonomy while simultaneously seeking to tame the dangers of over-consumption (Tiersten, 2001); it suggests specifically that autonomy and bourgeois femininity are indeed compatible. In the *Figaro illustré* series, the female reader, sketched as the ideal aesthetic consumer, found exactly what she was being told elsewhere she should be looking for. Browsing the magazine, spoken to by the ‘salesman’ Thiébaut-Sisson in language meant to both amuse her and to gain her trust, she discovers an artist who meets her (imagined) desire for a proper home. The next step would be to leave behind her virtual guide and enter the urban space to seek out the studio for real, to exercise the freedom granted her within the capitalist system: the power to consume – albeit according to predefined consumptive patterns and channeled aesthetic taste.

Notes

1. Interestingly, the same strategy had been used some years before to sell *avant-garde* painting to women. In an 1877 issue of *L’Impressioniste* (an exclusive rather than general-audience medium), the movement’s champion, George Rivière, wrote an open letter expressly addressed to the journal’s female readers (it begins with ‘Madame’), encouraging them to follow their own taste rather than that of their husbands when it came to purchasing art and, in particular, to having their portrait painted. As they had surely visited the recent Impressionist exhibition, and he was certain that what they had seen had pleased them, he asks them to support the movement by doing their best to convince their spouses to take up the cause, to abandon their conservatism in matters of art, and perhaps even to allow the lady of the house to have her likeness done by one of the young artists. See *L’Impressioniste. Journal d’art* 3 (21 April 1877). Iskin (2007, 21) sees this as evidence that women were perceived as having their own advanced taste and as agents exercising ‘their gaze in aesthetic matters.’ According to her, Rivière’s letter has the flavor of advertising copy, resembling those texts mixed into brief articles or editorials in the daily and illustrated press – in short, the author addresses them in a fashion absolutely typical of the way women were spoken to in advertising and women’s magazines.
2. It is important to note that ‘art critic’ was a broadly defined term in the nineteenth century. Many wrote not only for the (professional) art press, but also for newspapers and popular journals, adapting their subject matter and writing style accordingly. On the formation of the field of art criticism see, among others, Orwitz (2014) and Bouillion (1990). The classic study on the relationship between dealers, critics and artists in this period is of course White and White (1993), but see also Moriarty (1994).

3. Much recent research has been devoted to expanding the notion of (art) collecting to encompass the kinds of objects that have been available to women down the ages. See, among others, Verlaine (2013); Bracken (2012); Goggin (2009); Macleod (2008); Gere (1999); and Lawrence (1997). It is interesting to note that in all of these publications when it comes to discussing the collecting of fine art, the collectors dealt with are exclusively those extraordinarily wealthy women who collected avant-garde art. Upper-middle and middle class women of lesser means – such as those to whom the Figaro series is addressed – and their involvement in the broader high-art market have yet to be researched in any depth.

4. Evidence for this may be found in the few nineteenth-century images of women newspaper-readers, which almost exclusively depict them reading Le Figaro: for example, Mary Cassatt’s portrait of her mother of 1878, entitled Reading Le Figaro (private collection); or Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s portrait of Mme. Monet, painted in 1872 (Lisbon, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation). Interestingly, the latter shows her reading the paper’s back pages – that is: those devoted to advertising and reviews. The paintings of the Impressionists also confirm this: when women readers appear, they often hold illustrated magazines in their hands. See Eduard Manet, Woman Reading, 1879/80 (Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois) and Pierre-August Renoir, Young Woman Reading an Illustrated Journal, 1880 (RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island).

5. Although by 1898 there were two ‘official’ Salons – the Salon des artistes français and the Salon de Champs-de-Mars – Thiébault-Sisson does not distinguish between them, referring in the article only to le Salon. The artists he discusses exhibited at either one or the other of the two venues.


7. In 1888, four of them – Bonnat, Lefebvre, Carolus-Duran, and Henner – had even appeared in a popular book focusing on the most famous ‘painters of women’ of the day, written by Claude – or Violette – Vento; see Vento (1888).

8. The incorporation of such works, which clearly break with the appeal to an explicitly female audience, can probably be explained by the fact that some of these were what we now think of as stock photos, and most likely not made specifically for inclusion in this article. That some of them are reproduced in other publications, both before and after their appearance in the Figaro illustré series, underlines their generic nature.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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