

## Evolution of Parisian Women Through Art

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Surrounded by the Tuileries gardens, the Champs Élysées, and the Seine River, the Place de la Concorde has maintained its status as one of Paris's major public squares since its construction in the late eighteenth century. It is marked by a tumultuous history, first serving as a monument to the then ruling Louis XV and subsequently transforming into a site of mass guillotine executions during the French Revolution.<sup>72</sup> As a public space, the Place de la Concorde has witnessed dynamic shifts in Parisian society throughout the past two centuries and has been the subject of numerous artists. French painter Jean Béraud, renowned for depicting the life of Paris during the Belle Époque, portrays a woman in the square at the end of the nineteenth century in his 1885 work titled *Parisian on the Place de la Concorde* (Figure 1). Seven decades later, Russian-French artist and early modernist Marc Chagall portrayed a man, woman, and child overlooking the square in his vibrant color lithograph *Place de la Concorde* (Figure 2). Béraud's painting, oscillating between impressionist and Salon-style techniques, offers a glimpse of the emerging dominance Parisian women began to enjoy in public spaces during the Belle Époque. Chagall's lithograph, distinct in its vivid coloring and expressive sketching, presents individuals living in a post-war Paris, categorized by reconstruction and an influx of migrants.<sup>73</sup> Thus, Béraud's and Chagall's diverse depictions of the Place de la Concorde and its frequenters implicate the viewer in Paris's evolution as a city that underwent "an unparalleled period of contentment and pleasures" during the 1880s, followed by a post-war period of modernization seventy years later.<sup>74</sup>

Béraud's portrait of an elegantly dressed woman holding a daintily wrapped package in the Place de la Concorde is characteristic of the "detailed, legible, and apparently objective images" of Paris life that distinguished his career as a Salon artist.<sup>75</sup> Although he was the friend of aristocrats and espoused right-wing politics, Béraud's quasi-encyclopedic apparent objectivity established his works as social analyses of the Belle Époque. In *Parisian on the Place de la Concorde*, Béraud denotes the upper-class status of the woman by emphasizing the fluid and tailored shapes of her dress whilst creating a visual juxtaposition of her dark figure with the "grey and ochre backdrop" of the square.<sup>76</sup> Béraud accentuates the woman's flamboyant attire and allows her figure to take up the majority of the portraits space. The neatly wrapped package the woman carefully holds, placed at the center of the painting to contrast the dark dress, is suggestive of her materialistic tendencies and ability to partake in activities of leisure such as shopping. Thus,

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<sup>72</sup> Paul Lagasse and Columbia University, "Concorde, Place de la," *The Columbia Encyclopedia*. Columbia University Press, 2018.  
[http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/columency/concorde\\_place\\_de\\_la/0?institutionId=1724](http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/columency/concorde_place_de_la/0?institutionId=1724)

<sup>73</sup> Laure Blévis and Eric Preznet, "CFTC/CFDT Attitudes towards Immigration in the Parisian Region: Making Immigrant Workers' Condition a Cause," *Urban Studies* 49, no. 3 (February 2012): 685-701, doi:10.1177/0042098011431619.

<sup>74</sup> Colin Jones, *Paris: The Biography of a City* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 343.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Thompson, "Jean Béraud. Paris," *The Burlington Magazine* 141, no. 1160 (1999): 699, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/888579>.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Béraud highlights the woman’s privilege to enjoy luxury and benefit from the economic prosperity of the period. The presence of male figures in the background dressed in coats and top hats evinces the peace of the Belle Époque by revealing to the viewer that the men of Paris are at home living and working, rather than away at war. Béraud’s inclusion of the shape of a faint horse-drawn carriage on the horizon reinforces the late nineteenth century quality of the work, as automobiles did not become widely available until the early twentieth century. The aforementioned details serve as visual affirmations of a time period in which Paris was experiencing peace and intervals of economic success from the beginning of the French Third Republic to the outbreak of World War I, otherwise known as the Belle Époque.

Along with prominent artists of the late nineteenth century such as Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Picasso, Béraud embarked on a “quest for the representation of the living woman” in his art.<sup>77</sup> The direct gaze of the woman in Béraud’s work, coupled with the absence of a male figure by her side, emphasizes her independence as well as the increased social freedom women had begun to enjoy in Paris toward the latter half of the nineteenth century. As the twentieth century dawned, French society recognized ordinary activities such as shopping alone to be “symbolically revolutionary acts” carried out by distinctly modern women.<sup>78</sup> Parisian women gradually began to reject their confinement to compressed interior spaces and emerged in the public sphere where they dominated squares, parks, and gardens without being categorized as sexualized or fallen.<sup>79</sup> The boulevard culture of promenading in public spaces enabled artists to portray women as “independent, active creators and consumers of modern culture” alongside their male counterparts.<sup>80</sup> Thus, Béraud’s depiction of a woman enjoying independence and luxury serves as an integral element of the lingering Haussmannian vision for Paris to be the quintessential definition of modernity.

Chagall’s *Place de la Concorde* advances and reshapes the concept of Parisian modernity through his allusion to immigration and urban renewal following the end of World War II. Throughout the 1950s, France experienced an influx of European immigrants searching for better opportunities that their war-ravished native countries could not offer them.<sup>81</sup> Jews, Armenians, Poles, and Russians were the primary immigrant groups that looked to France as a “refuge from the turmoil and persecution” that persisted in their homelands.<sup>82</sup> As a Belarusian Jew living in France at the time, Chagall incorporated both Eastern and Western lines of art tradition to symbolize the increasing diversification of post-war Paris, as well as his own liminality between France and Russia.<sup>83</sup> The concentric and circular form of Eastern art manifests in the figures of the woman and child that are being covered with a round protective veil by a male figure in the sky. In contrast, the linear form of Western art is depicted in the straight strokes Chagall uses to illustrate the Luxor Obelisk in the center of the Place de la Concorde and its surrounding buildings.

<sup>77</sup> Victoria Cooke, “Femme, Femme, Femme: Paintings of Women in French Society from Daumier to Picasso from the Museums of France,” *American Artist* 71, no. 776 (May 2007): 6.

<http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/docview/232316825?accountid=14244>.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>79</sup> Aruna D’Souza and Tom McDonough, *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 34.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Blévis and Prezet, ““CFTC/CFDT Attitudes towards Immigration in the Parisian Region,” 685-701.

<sup>82</sup> David H. Kaplan, “Immigration and the making of place in Paris,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 32, no.1 (2015): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2015.1004855>.

<sup>83</sup> Allyn Weisstein, “Iconography of Chagall,” *The Kenyon Review* 16, no. 1 (1954): 40, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4333462>.

The visual collision of East and West adheres to the immigration patterns observed in France, and reinforces the lithograph’s narrative of a French fatherland providing protection to Eastern European immigrants seeking refuge.

The levitation of the figures and their overarching dominance of the landscape below, a common theme in Chagall’s works, symbolizes the cultural transcendence of the immigrant psyche.<sup>84</sup> A faint green halo surrounds the heads of the woman and child, alluding to the iconographic images of Madonna and Child present in Slavic Orthodox churches. By painting the woman in the image of Madonna, Chagall accentuates the sacrificial role Eastern European women played in the war when summoned by their homelands to send their sons to the frontlines. Thus, the religious connotation of the woman portrays her as a votive figure seeking sanctuary in Paris, a city of cultural diversification. Chagall’s choice to incorporate vehicles at the bottom of the lithograph highlights Paris’s technological rebirth after the war, as the availability of resources grew due to the region’s newfound peace. Through his emphasis of immigration and technological advancement, Chagall’s work offers the viewer an image of a growing and recovering Paris. Whereas Béraud’s concept of Parisian modernity was defined by wealth and the autonomy of women, Chagall’s notion of modernity was grounded in Paris’s post-war revival and its acceptance of immigrants in pursuit of better lives.

Béraud’s work provides the viewer a conceptualization of late nineteenth century Paris through the image of an upper-class Parisian woman enjoying her newfound independence from the confined sphere of private life. The limited background presence of the male figure in the painting expands upon the idea that Parisian women began to exist for themselves rather than as an extension of men. Béraud presents the woman as an iconographic representation of the Belle Époque, in which Paris enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity prior to the beginning of World War I. Chagall’s work conceptualizes post-war 1950s Paris as a city that provides protection for Eastern European immigrants fleeing their destroyed homelands. While Béraud emphasizes the materialistic and independent qualities of the woman in *Parisian on the Place de la Concorde*, Chagall highlights the sacrificial quality of immigrant women and the way in which they existed between two cultures in his *Place de la Concorde*. Both artists depict modes of transportation representative of their works’ respective time periods. Béraud paints a horse drawn carriage that was used prior to the invention of the automobile whilst Chagall illustrates vehicles on a road to mark the technological advancement Paris experienced after World War II.

Béraud’s and Chagall’s portrayals of the Place de la Concorde offer two characterizations of Paris’s modernity seven decades apart. The works suggest a shift in the public sphere, as well as in Parisian innovation. Thus, the artists’ depictions of women and the small background details in each work illuminate life in Paris as a constantly evolving pursuit of modernity.

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<sup>84</sup> Lvovich, Natasha, “Translingual Identity and Art: Marc Chagall’s Stride through the Gates of Janus,” *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 3, no.1 (2015): 112-134. ISSN 2325-2871.



Figure 1: Jean Béraud, *Parisian on the Place de la Concorde*, 1885, oil on panel, 47.7x39.8 cm, Paris, Musée Carnavalet



Figure 2: Marc Chagall, *Place de la Concorde*, 1952, color lithograph, 35.2x26.4 cm, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art

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