LA MÈRE MODERNE:
REPRESENTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD IN FRENCH VISUAL CULTURE, 1910-1940

Davenne Essif

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Art History.

Chapel Hill
2018

Approved by:
Daniel J. Sherman
Edouardo Douglas
Donald M. Reid
Mary Louise Roberts
Tatiana C. String
ABSTRACT

Davenne Essif: La Mère Moderne: Representations of Motherhood in French Visual Culture 1910-1940
(Under the direction of Daniel J. Sherman)

Between 1910 and 1940 in France, the ideal of motherhood fueled important political decisions, promoted dreams of a powerful nation, and defined French women’s roles as citizens. Within this context, visual images played a key role in reinforcing motherhood’s centrality to French cultural identity by distilling a range of values into readily accessible and widely distributed representations. Historical and art-historical studies that have addressed the role played by visual imagery for the most part reinforce the conventional tie between representations of mothers and themes of self-sacrifice, patriotism, and especially tradition. Yet between 1910 and 1940, much as today, motherhood embodied more than these conventional tropes. Representations of mother figures also actively participated in the construction of highly complex cultural identities and even modernity.

In four thematic chapters, this study builds a complex and varied view of images of motherhood that acted as a medium to introduce and explore rapid social, cultural, and political change rather than stasis or timelessness. First presenting an overview of conventional visual-cultural representations of motherhood, it then moves to a more focused investigation of two Paris monuments, The Monument to Marguerite Boucicaut and Clara de Hirsch by Paul Moreau-Vauthier (1914) and The Monument to French Mothers by Henri Bouchard and Alexandre Descatoire (1938), and paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, Marie Laurencin, Fernand
Lèger, Tamra de Lempicka, Suzanne Valadon, and Francis Picabia. As the chapters use the methodologies of feminist art history and cultural history to investigate the images, policies, social practices, philosophies, and even artists’ biographies in and behind such varied representations, they offer a new interpretation of early-twentieth-century French history. Mother figures were not straightforward cultural icons, looking strictly back to tradition. Rather, much as they still do today, representations of motherhood created between 1910 and 1940 in France acted as a site of speculation, hope, anxiety, and change.
for my father,  
whose immeasurable confidence in me has never wavered
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am both humbled and inspired by the many people and institutions that have helped make this project a reality. First and foremost, I must thank my advisor, Daniel J. Sherman, whose dedication to his students and their work is unparalleled. His patience, steady guidance, and high standards enabled and challenged me to transform a broad interest into this dissertation. Thank you also to my committee members whose insightful and stimulating feedback helped shape this study and lay a groundwork for its next iteration. Early in this project, Mary Sheriff challenged me to keep visual analysis at the heart of my work. Eduardo Douglas’s comments have helped me to pause and ponder, adding great richness to my writing. As I strove to combine the approaches of art history and cultural history, Don Reid provided much needed guidance and support. From the beginning, Mary Louise Roberts’s research played a pivotal role in this project and I am honored by her enthusiasm for my work. Her comments have helped me to add depth to my thesis and my understanding of this period. Finally, Tatiana String has helped me to broaden my art historical knowledge and tighten and strengthen the structure of this study.

I am also very grateful for the institutions that supported my graduate studies and the completion of this dissertation. Thank you to the UNC Art Department for all their backing during my studies and years of dissertating. Thank you to the Ackland Art Museum for the opportunity to act as the Object-Based Teaching Fellow 2016-2017 and to learn from Carolyn Allmendinger and Elizabeth Manekin a way of looking that subtly, but significantly, changed my approach to visual analysis. Thank you to the UNC Graduate School for continued support of this project. The Kathryn Miller Glass Summer Research Fellowship and the Off-Campus
Dissertation Fellowship allowed me to spend essential research time in Paris and London. The Dissertation Completion Fellowship gave me the space and time to finish this study.

While in London and Paris in summer 2013 and spring 2016, I made many contacts and incurred many debts of gratitude. First, I would like to thank Jean-Pierre Brun whose generosity, along with the graduate school’s fellowships, enabled me to spend extended time in Paris. Next, I would like to extend my gratitude to Laurence Bertrand-Dorleac who helped bring me to Paris as an invited doctoral candidate at the Centre d’histoire de Sciences Po, and whose lively conversation and generous invitations to talks and dinners enabled me to discuss and refine my ideas with French scholars. Also at Sciences Po, I would like to thank Marc Lazar, Isabelle de Vienne, and Danièle Legalloudec. I spent many hours at the libraries and archives in Paris and I would like to thank the librarians and staff at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Institut national d’histoire de l’art, the Archives Nationales, and the Archives de Paris. I received generous support from curators and staff at the Tate Modern, the Musée d’Orsay, and the Centre Georges Pompidou whose head archivist, Camille Morando, took a special interest in this project.

Finally, I would like to thank Robin Holmes for her insightful comments and unfailing support. Les Essif has provided invaluable comments and guidance. Debbie Essif and Ainara Rice have added great richness to this project by giving motherhood meaning in my own life. And I am truly grateful for James Rice whose constancy, much needed humor, and never-ending confidence in my work sustained this project from its inception.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF FIGURES** ................................................................................................................................. x

**INTRODUCTION** ......................................................................................................................................... 1

**CHAPTER 1: IDEAL MOTHER: THE ICON OF FRENCH MOTHERHOOD IN VISUAL CULTURE** ........................................................... 20

- Early Pronatalism and Ideals of Motherhood in France .................................................................................. 21
- 1910s: The Pre-war Years and World War I ................................................................................................. 33
- 1920s and 1930s: The Interwar Years ....................................................................................................... 49
- Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................ 74

**CHAPTER 2: SILENCE: BUILDING A NATIONAL RHETORIC OF MATERNITY** .......... 76

- Honoring an Ideal: Calls to Build ........................................................................................................... 79
- Aesthetic Choices: The Sculptors and the Monuments’ Forms ................................................................. 87
- Social Harmony: Location and Class .......................................................................................................... 101
- French Mothers: Issues of Race and Identity ............................................................................................... 112
- Collective Identity: Feminism and Women’s Roles in the State and Society ........................................ 120
- Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................ 120

**CHAPTER 3: EMPTINESS: QUESTIONING THE IDEAL OF MOTHERHOOD THROUGH ABSENCE** ................................................................................................................................................ 135

- Giorgio de Chirico: The Theatrical Emptiness of *The Painter’s Faimly* .................................................. 138
- Tamara de Lempicka: The Vacant *Femme Moderne* and Motherhood ................................................ 151
- Francis Picabia: The Absence of Life ........................................................................................................ 162
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Paul Klenck, *Pétroleuse (Les incendiaires)* ................................................................. 238

Figure 1.2 Image accompanying feature story on Anna de Noailles in the first issue of *La Vie Heureuse* ................................................................. 238

Figure 1.3 Robert Sigl, “Ce qui fait notre force…” ................................................................. 239

Figure 1.4 Henry Bing, “La Nietzschienne” ........................................................................ 239

Figure 1.5 Robert Sigl, “La vierge au miroir” ........................................................................ 240

Figure 1.6 Robert Sigl, “La vierge forte” ........................................................................ 240

Figure 1.7 “Soucieuse de déveloper ses facultés intellectuelles…” ........................................ 241

Figure 1.8 M. G. de Conenson, “Notre race en peril” .......................................................... 241

Figure 1.9 Georges Lepape, *Le Hochet* ........................................................................ 242

Figure 1.10 Mors automobiles, “Nos Artistes en automobile: Madame Cécile Thévenet” ...... 242

Figure 1.11 Auguste Roubille, poster design ........................................................................ 243

Figure 1.12 Auguste Roubille, cover design for Louise Babet’s *Le Livre des mères* ........ 243

Figure 1.13 G. Capon, “La Femme française pendant la guerre” ............................................. 244

Figure 1.14 G. Douanne, “Soignons la Basse-Cour” ................................................................. 244

Figure 1.15: Victor Prouvé, “Hygéine de guerre” .................................................................... 245

Figure 1.16: Gino Severini, *Motherhood* ........................................................................ 245

Figure 1.17: Francisque Poulbot, “Le monument des soldats?...j’y vais aussi” ..................... 246

Figure 1.18: Henri Lebasque, *L’Emprunt de la Paix* ............................................................. 246

Figure 1.19: Henri Royer, Ligue pour le relèvement de la natalité française et la défense des familles nombreuses .............................................................. 247

Figure 1.20: Front page of *La Française* ........................................................................ 248

Figure 1.21: Beringa, “Quelques congressistes” ...................................................................... 249

Figure 1.22: Marcelle Botton, “Ceux qui ne votenot pas, ne comptent pas” ......................... 249
Figure 1.23: Detail from central panel of Rogier van der Weyden, *The Last Judgment* ........ 250
Figure 1.24: Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Michael Weighing a Human Soul and a Devil* ........ 250
Figure 1.25: Central portal detail, *The Last Judgement* .................................................. 251
Figure 1.26: Phoscao advertisement .................................................................................. 251
Figure 1.27: Lait Bena advertisement .................................................................................. 252
Figure 1.28: L’Irium advertisement featuring film star Joan Blondell and her son ........... 252
Figure 1.29: Paris-Rhône vacuums advertisement .............................................................. 253
Figure 1.30: Pablo Picasso, *Mother and Child* ................................................................. 253
Figure 1.31: Pablo Picasso, *Maternité* ............................................................................ 254
Figure 1.32: Reproduction of Berthe Morisot’s *La Vasque* .............................................. 254
Figure 1.33: Félix Rasumny, attr., Commemorative coin for the *Éxposition de la maternité et de l’enfance* ................................................................. 255
Figure 1.34: Raphael, *Madonna della seggiola (Madonna of the Chair)* ....................... 255
Figure 1.35: Poster for the *Éxposition de la maternité et de l’enfance* ......................... 255
Figure 1.36: Jean Carlu, “Pour le Désarmement de nations” ........................................... 256
Figure 1.37: Postcard photograph of the 1937 Exposition Intérnationale ......................... 256
Figure 1.38: A. Dubout, “At the Exposition: once again, these two are the ones fighting” .................................................................................................................. 257

Figure 2.1: Paul Moreau-Vauthier, *The Monument to Madame Marguerite Boucicaut and Baroness Clara de Hirsch* ................................................................. 258
Figure 2.2: Henri Bouchard and Alexandre Descatoire, *The Monument to French Mothers* .................................................................................................................. 258
Figure 2.3: Paul Moreau-Vauthier, *La Parisienne* ............................................................ 259
Figure 2.4: Detail of *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* ........................................... 259
Figure 2.5: Detail of the mother figure in the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* ........ 260
Figure 2.6: Detail of de Hirsch’s face, *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* .................................. 260
Figure 2.7: Detail of Boucicaut’s face, *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* ................................. 260
Figure 2.8: Unknown photographer, Marguerite Boucicaut .................................................................. 261
Figure 2.9: Unknown photographer, Baroness Clara de Hirsch ............................................................. 261
Figure 2.10: Paul Poiret, “La Perse” ........................................................................................................ 262
Figure 2.11: “Women’s Fashion” ........................................................................................................... 262
Figure 2.12: “Clothes for boys and men” ............................................................................................... 263
Figure 2.13: Detail of central grouping, *Monument to French Mothers* ............................................. 263
Figure 2.14: Detail of figures to the left of central group, *Monument to French Mothers* .................. 264
Figure 2.15: Detail of figures to the right of central group, *Monument to French Mothers* ............... 264
Figure 2.16: Figural “types” to left of the central group, *Monument to French Mothers* .................. 265
Figure 2.17: Figural “types” to the right of the central group, *Monument to French Mothers* ............ 265
Figure 2.18: Emilie Rolez, *La Veuve* .................................................................................................. 266
Figure 2.19: Auguste Carli, *Monument aux morts* ............................................................................. 266
Figure 2.20: Detail, M. Hoeuw, *Monument aux morts* ........................................................................ 267
Figure 2.21: Alexandre Descatoire, *La Jeunesse* ................................................................................ 267
Figure 2.22: Henri Bouchard, *Maternité en Bois* ................................................................................ 268
Figure 2.23: Henri Bouchard, *Madame Bouchard et ses trois enfants* .............................................. 268
Figure 2.24: Detail of nurse, *Monument to French Mothers* ............................................................... 269
Figure 2.25: The crowd as pictured in *Le Matin* .................................................................................. 269
Figure 3.1: Giorgio de Chirico, *The Painter’s Family* ........................................................................ 270
Figure 3.2: Tamara de Lempicka, *Maternity* ................................................................. 270
Figure 3.3: Francis Picabia, *Mother and Child* ............................................................... 271
Figure 3.4 Tailor’s dummy ..................................................................................................... 271
Figure 3.5 Tailor’s dummy ..................................................................................................... 271
Figure 3.6: “Application peau argent au peau de pêche” ...................................................... 272
Figure 3.7: Max Klinger, *Crucifixion* .................................................................................. 272
Figure 3.8: Pablo Picasso, *Maternity* .................................................................................. 273
Figure 3.9: Robert de la Fresnaye, *Mother and Child* ......................................................... 273
Figure 3.10: Anonymous, *L’Inconnue de la Seine* ............................................................... 274
Figure 3.11: José Simont, “The Wanton Barbarism of the Zeppelin” ...................................... 274
Figure 3.12: “A moi, maman j’ai très faim!” ........................................................................ 275
Figure 4.1: Fernand Léger, *The City* .................................................................................. 276
Figure 4.2: Léger, *Le Grand Déjeuner* .............................................................................. 276
Figure 4.3: Léger, *La Mère et l’enfant (chien sous table)* .................................................. 277
Figure 4.4: Léger, *La Femme et l’enfant (La mère et l’enfant)* .......................................... 277
Figure 4.5: Léger, *Femmes dans un Intérieur* .................................................................... 278
Figure 4.6: Manet, *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* ........................................................................... 278
Figure 4.7: Léger, *Personnages dans un Jardin* ................................................................. 279
Figure 4.8: Léger, *Personnages devant un Jardin* .............................................................. 279
Figure 4.9: Léger, *Sketch (Study for Personnages devant un Jardin)* ................................. 280
Figure 4.10: Suzanne Valadon, *Young Girl with Cat* ....................................................... 280
Figure 4.11: Suzanne Valadon, *Louison and Raminou* ..................................................... 281
Figure 4.12: Auguste Renoir, *Maternité (Femme allaitant son enfant)* .............................. 281
Figure 4.13: Auguste Renoir, *Sleeping Girl with Cat* ................................................................. 282
Figure 4.14: Valadon, *Reclining Nude* ......................................................................................... 282
Figure 4.15: Suzanne Valadon, *Catharine Reclining Nude on a Panther Skin* ......................... 283
Figure 4.16: Marie Laurencin, Self-portrait sketch ........................................................................ 283
Figure 4.17: Talbot, Marie Laurencin .............................................................................................. 284
Figure 4.18: Marie Laurencin, *La Danse* ....................................................................................... 284
Figure 4.19: Laurencin, *Self Portrait with Cat* ............................................................................ 285
Figure 4.20: Raphael, *The Small Cowper Madonna* .................................................................. 285
Figure 4.21: Alexandre Cabanel, *Venus* ....................................................................................... 286
Figure 4.22: Adolphe-William Bouguereau, *Naissance de Vénus* ............................................ 286
Figure 4.23: Marie Laurencin, *Portrait of Mademoiselle Chanel* ............................................... 287
Figure 4.24: Antonio Canova, *Pauline Bonaparte as Venus Victrix* ......................................... 287
Figure 4.25: Nicolas Poussin, *Annunciation* .............................................................................. 288
Figure 4.26: Jean Bourdichon, Manuscript leaf with Annunciation from a Book of Hours ........... 288
Figure 5.1: Sephora, *Top Maman*, catalogue cover ................................................................. 289
Figure 5.2: Sephora, *Top Maman*, poster ................................................................................ 289
Figure 5.3: Auguste Renoir, *Le déjeuner des canotiers* ............................................................. 290
Figure 5.4: Sephora, Photo of *Top Maman* bus stop poster ..................................................... 290
INTRODUCTION

Building on longstanding traditions, including that of the Christian Madonna and Child, French culture between 1910 and 1940 produced an idealized icon of motherhood that spoke to deep-rooted desires for stability and familiarity. During this important period of transition and transformation, advances in technology and industry, such as automobiles and a growing reliance on mass production, transformed the daily life of many French citizens, while changes in fashion, from shorter skirts and hair for women to ready-to-wear clothing, altered the “look” of French culture. At the same time, improved airpower and weaponry rendered war far more deadly to soldiers and citizens alike, while, among other factors, economic difficulties put great strain on recovery from World War I. Within this context, many commentators positioned visible changes as evidence of a faltering French nation and idealized permanence and tradition as the solution to France’s myriad struggles.

Playing into the dichotomy of modernity and tradition, the image of the mother became a symbol of convention. Uninterested in changing fashions or modern technology, the devoted mother cared only for her child, just as generations of mothers had before her (and would after her). Thus images of loving mothers nurturing children of all ages circulated widely in visual culture, from newspapers to posters and films, as a reassuring contrast to the changes of modern life. A symbol of healthy population growth, constancy, and patriotic commitment, the mother also stood in opposition to the increasingly visualized figure of the independent modern woman who, many people feared, posed a threat to national stability with her rejection of traditional
gender roles and refusal to bear children. In the binary created between these two figures, the mother’s connection to an unchanging, traditional past balanced the progressive and unstable future represented by the modern woman.

The icon of the mother, however, did not remain as constant as many sources and images imagined or claimed it did. As much a product of modernity as any other cultural representation, images of motherhood were as complex and varied as the circumstances under which they were given form. Though images in many sources from newspapers to posters attempted to maintain a strict interpretation of the mother as traditional, artistic interpretations of this figure offer possibilities unexplored elsewhere in visual culture. As Tamar Garb has argued, the artifice and inventiveness of art allows for subtle if not fully intentional subversion of social norms and strictures. The artistic representations of motherhood examined here, demonstrate the subtleties as well as the depths of such subversion. This study thus takes up a close examination of selected artworks completed in France between 1910 and 1940 in which concepts of motherhood and

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2 Current scholarship reflects this binary as many critical studies carefully examine and theorize the “modern woman,” while mothers are more consistently treated as a universal ideal. Compare, for example: Liz Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), and Marta Alvarez González, *The Art of Motherhood*, trans. Anthony Shugaar (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010). Conor looks carefully at the ways in which the feminine identity of the “modern woman” was created and refined in 1920s Parisian visual culture, while González brings together a collection of over two hundred artworks, pairing them not with critical commentary but with quotations on motherhood from famous literary and public figures. For some notable exceptions to this trend, see Note 10.

3 Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998): 12.
modernity intersect in representations of female figures.\textsuperscript{4} Approaching these representations as complex socio-cultural products, four main chapters investigate the relationship between the visual construction of motherhood and artistic navigations of modern French culture. Challenging the binary of mother/modern woman, the chapters examine various works of art that explore as well as break down definitive distinctions between traditional mothers and progressive \textit{femmes modernes}. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates the ways in which male and female artists, much like society at large, used the mother as an exploratory device that supported critical investigations of complex cultural preoccupations as well as the imagined future of the country’s citizens.\textsuperscript{5}

Toward the turn of the century, women in France were increasingly recognized as active participants in public life, and a carefully constructed dichotomy of the mother and \textit{femme moderne} allowed commentators to discuss acceptable female roles in society. During the first half of the nineteenth century, anonymity and invisibility were the two most commonly accepted modes for respectable women to adopt in public; rather than being absent from public life, French women were “unseen.”\textsuperscript{6} Around the middle of the century, however, with both the Haussmannization of Paris, which cleared vast boulevards and created new parks in the city, and

\begin{itemize}
\item[4] Though the definition of “modernity” is frequently contested and constantly changing, in this study I use the term broadly in accordance with its basic definition in the Oxford English Dictionary: “An intellectual tendency or social perspective characterized by departure from or repudiation of traditional ideas, doctrines, and cultural values in favor of \textit{contemporary} or radical values and beliefs.” In other words, as a broad term of categorization for the society of the time period (1910-1940) and for the progressive artistic styles employed by the artists under consideration.

\item[5] In considering conceptions of the future, I draw on the work of Roxanne Panchasi which highlights an interwar emphasis on “collective anticipation” in addition to memory. She argues that during the interwar period in France, “the future, as well as the past, expectation and experience, figured in debates about ‘Frenchness,’ competing ideas about the definition, preservation, and protection of a sense of national identity and culture.” See: Roxanne Panchasi, \textit{Future Tense: The Culture of Anticipation in France Between the Wars} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009): 8.

\end{itemize}
the advent of the department store, where female customers in particular were encouraged to linger, women found new spaces of independence. This newfound freedom brought greater attention to women in the public sphere. Up to this point, however, recognized roles for women in public were limited to prostitute, ragpicker, laundress, and other questionable types. Social anxieties surrounding the idea of newly independent women manifested in two major categories: the fear that women could be corrupted by their new surroundings and the fear that their independence would disrupt conventional gender roles and pose a threat to traditional society. Such concerns led to a cultural emphasis on the mother figure as the ideal female public persona. Thus, during the last half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the trope of bourgeois motherhood allowed women freedom to be seen on the streets and in parks, stores, and other venues around the community without compromising their respected position in society.

After World War I, the emphasis on the mother only increased, as many French pronatalists, politicians, and other authorities used discussions of female identity and a crumbling division of gender as an accessible way to negotiate larger, less approachable postwar issues. Of this trend, Mary Louise Roberts writes, “For many French men, it was simpler to think about the dramatic shifts in their wives’ behavior or in women’s fashion than it was to seek to understand something as abstract as the fall of the franc or the decline of the middle class.” In fact, as Roberts has demonstrated, veterans such as Pierre Drieu la Rochelle positioned gender as one of,

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if not the, “primary referent[s] for the ruin of civilization itself.” 9 In other words, commentators placed the blame for population decline, weakened military power, high unemployment rates, and other phenomena on the disruption of clearly delineated masculine and feminine roles in French society. At the same time, flagging population growth inspired fears that France would not have the manpower to rebuild and recover from the Great War or fight in the event of renewed hostilities between nations. As they were represented in text and image mothers symbolized a possible solution to such problems. Willing to happily assume their role as stay-at-home caregiver to multiple children, women as mothers could help reset the balance of the genders and simultaneously repopulate the nation. Thus, as the French attempted to rebuild their society after armistice and reassert, or reinvent, the stability of Western civilization, many reached back into an ideal past to retrieve an untainted, essentialized concept of motherhood as the ideal “savior” of France.

During this time, images worked with texts to create a stable and reassuring image of ideal motherhood. Cartoons, drawings, paintings, and photographs of good mothers appeared in newspapers, magazines, posters, and books. At the same time, male and female artists, working in both traditional and avant-garde styles, took up the subject of motherhood and further contributed to the definition of this figure in visual culture. Art historical scholarship, however, has yet to critically interrogate such imagery in the period from 1910 to 1940. 10 Instead, as

9 Ibid., 4.

Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard argue, for many decades numerous studies have constructed a history in which women, and by association mothers, were erroneously understood as “paralyzed within and by an abstract system of social relationships and representational constructs.”

Certainly, scholarship like Linda Nochlin’s famous call to action stimulated a flowering of feminist art history dedicated to renegotiating the canon to interrogate women’s roles in society and art. But subsequent studies have tended, as Griselda Pollock notes, to be “deeply ambivalent toward, rather than bravely interrogative of, the maternal and/as the feminine.” Indeed, as the editors of *Motherhood in Literature and Culture* write, “Motherhood remains a complex and contested issue in feminist research as well as public discussion.”

Understood as traditionally canonical figures, in the guise of Mary, Mother Earth, Abundance and others, mothers can appear mired in the problematic framework of a patriarchal system of representation. But the relationship between mothers and culture was (and is) constantly renegotiated as the needs and concerns of various members of society evolved; even as an abstracted concept, the mother actively influenced French conceptions of past, present, and future in the twentieth century. In this context, then, mother figures operated as active cultural agents, open to interpretation and suggestive of a myriad of possibilities for women and society.

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Thus, as Pollock observes, it is imperative that critical scholarship explore the inherent potential of representations of motherhood. Working against assumptions that motherhood is a conventional role co-opted to maintain traditional and patriarchal hierarchies and systems, scholars should examine the nuances of this subject and be “so unfashionable as to look at avant-garde representations of the maternal-feminine in art.”

Indeed, as recently as this year, studies like *Motherhood in Literature and Culture* have insisted that “there is still so much to be said, both about mothers and by them.”

The four chapters of this study engage this “unfashionable” topic, examining representations of motherhood and directing attention toward the instantiation of various ideologies of maternity that bring varied perspectives to a much larger social ideal. Focusing on works by major artists living in France between 1910 and 1940, this study examines a variety of artistic, philosophical, and political approaches to motherhood. As they developed their personal interpretations of the maternal in modern society, artists like Paul Moreau-Vauthier, Henri Bouchard, Giorgio de Chirico, Tamara de Lempicka, and Suzanne Valadon incorporated maternal figures into their drawings, paintings, and sculptures. Avant-garde and traditional, associated with movements such as Surrealism and Dada and trends such as the “return to order,” the range of artists considered represented mothers in nuanced ways, endowing them with varying degrees of cultural agency. At the same time, their works illuminate the persistent

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15 Moreover, Pollock ties this absence to associations between mothers and essentialized tropes. She writes: “I think it is the confusion between the social ideologies of motherhood and the psychosemiotic research into the excess and significance of the maternal-feminine that has created a profound theoretical difficulty in feminist theory and practice. It has tended to make feminisim deeply ambivalent toward, rather than bravely interrogative of, the maternal and/as the feminine.” “Moments and Temporalities of the Avant-Garde…” 67.

tensions in representations of motherhood between the traditional and the modern, and, within
the modern, between accepted and more subversive tropes.

Throughout this examination of artists and their images of motherhood, the
methodological approaches of feminist art history and cultural history guide the explication of
the intricate relationship between representations of motherhood and twentieth-century French
culture. Scholarship in both fields of study has positioned the social navigation of gender as
playing a lead role in culture and society as well as discussions of the past. In this approach,
“gender” is defined as an analytical concept that “provides a way to decode meaning and to
understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction.”17 Indeed,
understood in this way, gender enables scholars “to disrupt the notion of fixity, to discover the
nature of the debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary
gender representation.”18 Similarly, this study positions motherhood as a category for historical
analysis. Seeking out encrypted meanings and complex relationships within representations of
motherhood, the four chapters of this study work to unravel the ideas and questions, hopes and
fears contained within selected images.

Adopting such an approach entails not only questioning the supposed stability and
tradition of such imagery but also building on feminist and cultural studies that aim to disrupt
more canonical interpretations of gender. Despite French laws that gave married women no more
rights than a minor, women in France did actively participate in society, their roles in constant
flux as the twentieth century unfolded. Similarly, as a part of the French visual context of this

18 Ibid., 43.
period, artistic representations of women played an active and constantly evolving role in cultural production. Recognizing such contingency and mutability, revisions to canonical views of the past have approached gender as a determined and determining social practice. For Broude and Garrard, for example, women have “steadily” and continuously participated in culture and have not been powerless or inactive participants in society but “active agents at every level.” Similarly, Scott has famously argued that historians must recognize the subjective, socially-constructed nature of gender and work toward “a refusal of the fixed and permanent quality of the binary opposition [between men and women], a genuine historicization and deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference.” In the field of art history such agency and contingency has inspired scholars such as Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, Mary Sheriff and Anne Higonnet to reconsider the image of women in art as well as the productivity and ingenuity of women artists such as Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Mary Cassatt, and Berthe Morisot, dealing at length with negotiations of gender roles and notions of maternity carried out in artistic works.

Much like their essential role in an understanding of gender, contingency and fabrication are also integral to any understanding of culture. Generally defined, “culture” is a complex construction subject to endless renegotiation and built on the perception of shared beliefs and

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21 Scott, “Gender,” 41.

values that are contingent on and sustained by systems of representation. Rather than operating as an “enduring, traditional, structural” system, “culture” is a “hybrid, often discontinuous inventive process.” Within such a process, the production of meaning takes on particular significance and acts as an operation through which representation and culture intertwine. As studies in the field of cultural history have made clear, visual representation, including artistic conceptions of various subjects, act as an important part of any society’s larger cultural context. Both action and artifact, representation works to create meaning by “caus[ing] signs to stand for an absent referent.” As such signs multiply and converge into “a set of interpretations and actions common to a social group,” they become, as Daniel J. Sherman explains, a culture, “a repository of the beliefs and values of a group of people and for signs and interpretive strategies they share.” In other words, as they appeared in galleries, museums, newspapers, books, and other contemporary media and venues (film, theater, etc.) images—from works of art to cartoons, photographs, and tableau-vivant—worked to define shared beliefs and values among French citizens and, in this capacity, became a visual culture.

In terms of the French visual construction of motherhood, images of female identity in the form of ideal mother and femme moderne operated as a set of beliefs and related actions that enabled French citizens to shape their culture. At the same time the image of the mother allowed the French to create a sense of shared purpose and understanding, it also offered “a compelling,

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accessible way to discuss [and construct] the meaning of social and cultural change.”

As a cultural figure intimately bound to the continuously shifting modern world, the mother became a symbol used to engage with contemporary life. Representations of maternity were actively and continuously (re)constructed, as new challenges and questions arose.

Certain scholars have already emphasized the important (visual) cultural role played by mothers as well as modern women between 1910 and 1940. Sherman, for example, has discussed the role of mothers in interwar French monuments as domesticated figures of patriotic sacrifice and tools to reestablish the order the Great War had disrupted. Adam C. Stanley, by contrast, has explored a more ephemeral engagement of motherhood and femininity in advertisements, articles, cartoons, and department story publicity materials that reinforced women’s traditional role as mothers while offering them access, albeit illusory and limited, to modern life. Similarly investigating the commercial realm, Liz Connor approaches the “spectacularization” of the progressive modern woman in the 1920s through an investigation of fashion magazines, cinema, and photographs of beauty contests, among other sources. She concludes that an emphasis on the visual production of meaning during this period ultimately led to “the intensification of the visual in the production of identity.” In each of these studies, it is clear not only that images played a critical role in French identity formation, but also that motherhood held a central role in popular constructs of femininity. Indeed, the complexity and mutability of images of femininity and their

26 Roberts, Civilization without Sexes, 6.

27 See specifically: Sherman, Construction of Memory, 202, 274-5.

28 This access as Stanely traces it was in great part provided through consumer goods such as refrigerators and washing machines. Adam C. Stanley, Modernizing Tradition: Gender and Consumerism in Interwar France and Germany (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

engagement with, and in certain cases disruption of, cultural ideals reveals the central and highly nuanced role of motherhood in (art) history.

By considering works of art alongside popular images in newspapers, magazines, and other contemporary cultural productions (film, theater, literature, and international expositions), as well as public debates on gender, this study explores the relationship between these visual constructions of motherhood and the specific context in which they were produced. At the same time, in order to emphasize the nuanced and varied artistic, philosophical, and political approaches to motherhood, this study groups works and artists thematically. Four main chapters thus focus on an overview of mothers in French visual culture from the late-nineteenth century to 1940; two Parisian monuments, *The Monument to Marguerite Boucicaut and Clara de Hirsch* by Paul Moreau-Vauthier (1914) and *The Monument to French Mothers* by Henri Bouchard and Pierre Descatoire (1936); as well as a range of works by major artists living in France during this period, including Giorgio de Chirico, Marie Laurencin, Fernand Léger, Tamara de Lempicka, Francis Picabia, and Suzanne Valadon. The work that these artists produced for and in a city in the throes of a “discursive obsession with female identity” reflects and engages the prevalent concerns and debates of their contemporary culture. At the same time, these artists push viewers toward the creation of new meanings as they explore the depths of biological motherhood and its alternatives. Though the range of personality and style among these artists and works may appear vast, each deals with the subject of motherhood in ways that place their figures within a modern context. The monuments not only present women dressed in contemporary clothing but also as public sculptures engage daily with modern viewers. The paintings use modernist techniques (Cubism, the modernist grid, unexpected juxtapositions of

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objects, unnatural colors), objects associated with contemporary consumption such as mannequins, and modern styles (bobbed haircuts, fashionable dress) to mark their women as contemporary. Most significantly, each artwork also clarifies women’s positions as actual or potential mothers by placing them in telling relationships to one or more secondary figures, most often children. Offering a close look at each of the selected works, I also situate the artworks within their socio-cultural context in order to clarify the intricate ways these images of mothers engage with, and resist, changing conceptions of motherhood and with the particular challenges, dilemmas, and opportunities of their era.

First, in order to address the widespread visual construction of femininity and motherhood, chapter one (“Ideal Mother: The Icon of French Motherhood in Visual Culture”) provides a broad investigation of representations of the mother and her supposed counterpart, the femme moderne from the late-nineteenth century to the interwar period. Engaging with sources from feminist newspaper La Française to pamphlets produced for the 1937 World’s Fair and books like F. A. Villermet’s La mobilisation des berceaux (The mobilization of the cradles), this chapter examines widespread debates on gender in France and the production of the supposed dichotomy of mother/modern woman. Beginning in the late-nineteenth century, feminists came under attack as un-sexed, unnatural women uninterested in marriage or children. This construction of the monstrous feminist continued as a touchstone for generations to come, in an attempt to denigrate any women agitating for change. At the same time, nineteenth-century constructions of the good mother, which themselves built on a long history of this theme,

31 A significant difference arises in chapter four, in which a discussion of surrogate mothers shifts focus to images of women who adopt a maternal relationship with cats and dogs, rather than children. Yet, as will become apparent, the ways in which the artists of these works echo traditional mother and child compositions clarifies the maternal nature of their female subjects.
continued to influence representations created in the early- to mid-twentieth century. This chapter thus begins with an overview of later nineteenth-century representations and debates before engaging with twentieth-century representations decade by decade.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the mother became an important figure in feminist literature and campaigns, as a figure used to legitimize their cause, and in advertisements, as a familiar, likable figure used to sell consumer goods. Then, with the advent of the First World War, as pronatalist concerns grew and French citizens attempted to understand their role in a nation at war, motherhood became the ultimate patriotic role for women. As soldiers endured pain and suffering for their nation, so, too, did mothers, who had to undergo the discomfort of childbirth in order to strengthen the French population. After the armistice, the 1920s saw both an increased focus on the figure of the femme moderne and a conservative backlash and “return to order” that placed emphasis on the good mother as the savior of a weakened France. At the same time, laws restricting the use or the spreading of information on contraception and abortion attempted to push increasingly independent and supposedly selfish modern women into embracing their maternal “duty.” Finally, economic hardship, lagging population growth, and intensifying fears of “The Next War,” defined the 1930s. At the same time, representations at the 1937 World’s Fair as well as many different advertising campaigns attempted to glamorize modern French motherhood. Though ultimately this study will engage with representations that defied the carefully constructed ideals of motherhood as distinct from modernity, a close look at both texts and images in this chapter demonstrates the persistence of certain ideals of traditional motherhood from the nineteenth century onward.

Following this broader look at representations of ideal motherhood in French visual culture, chapter two (“Silence: Building a National Rhetoric of Maternity”) examines public
monuments that attempt to further solidify a collective understanding of French motherhood as they place mother figures into the fabric of the city of Paris. The *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* (1910) and *Monument to French Mothers* (1938) (figs. 2.1 and 2.2) bookend the time period covered by this study and reveal continuities as well as changes that occurred over the course of these decades. As monuments, these artifacts represent some of the most prestigious, expensive, resource-heavy works of traditional art in French society. Simultaneously, as demonstrated through an engagement with the visual details of these works, their sculptors, the context of their locations, and the texts that worked to define their meaning and intent, these monuments represented an intricate negotiation of gender and politics. Despite hopes that these monuments would stand as seamless representations of a timeless ideal, themes from pronatalism and national security to modernity, fashion, race, and class disrupt easy interpretation of the women and values represented. Instead, both monuments operate as windows into larger national issues and tensions, including economic crisis, demographic changes, immigration, and antisemitism. As they influence interpretation of the monuments’ programs, such issues disrupt any vision of an idealized French nation or women as wholly self-sacrificing and silent.

Regardless of the intentions of the many men involved in both projects (donor Daniel Osiris, sculptors Paul Moreau-Vauthier, Henri Bouchard, and Paul Descatoire, sponsors Lucien Klotz and Edmond Labbé, as well as numerous committee members), both *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* and *Monument to French Mothers* speak to the complicated relationship between living women and the State, and, within the scope of this study, begin to reveal the complexities of modern motherhood.

National rhetoric formed only a part of the construction of meaning between 1910 and 1940. Indeed, certain artists working during this period took up themes that attempted to subvert
impressions of collective meaning or consensus. Chapter three (“Emptiness: Questioning the Ideal of Motherhood through Absence”) thus takes up an examination of three works that incorporate varying themes of emptiness: Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Painter’s Family*, Tamara de Lempicka’s *Maternity*, and Francis Picabia’s *Mother and Child* (figs. 3.1, 3.2, 3.3). Each of these paintings is unique within the artists’ larger oeuvres and place the mother into compositions that negate various aspects of her symbolic fullness (of regenerative potential, of love, of meaning). Unlike the various magazine and poster images of chapter one or the monuments of chapter two that attempt to convey obvious messages, these paintings engage seemingly lifeless figures, deep shadows, and confusions of symbols that intentionally work against a clear understanding of their subjects. Where de Chiric takes on a philosophical exploration of absence and metaphysicalty, de Lempicka and Picavia engage varying themes of cultural emptiness. In de Chirico’s work, a mannequin mother and her family suggest a metaphysical lack of truth and fixed meaning as they deny logical interpretations or conclusions. In de Lempicka’s *Maternity*, similarities between the mother figure and the metallic, inanimate mannequins of Parisian shop windows destabilize a popular binary as they create an uncomfortable link between the mother and her supposed opposite, the modern woman. Finally, in Picabia’s *Mother and Child*, eerie shadows combine with the two figures’ closed eyes to give the impression that mother and child wear a final mask of death. This, in turn, opposes the association of mothers with regeneration and abundance. In all three images, the artists resist clear and easily accessible messages, defying common tropes and ideals while pointing to the fabrication of meaning and the potential “emptiness” of accepted signs and tropes. This, in turn, reveals the potential mutability and subjectivity of constructions of motherhood.
Finally, chapter four (“Surrogacy: Substitution as Possibility”) moves from the dissolution of meaning considered in chapter three to a creation of new meanings and possibilities in works by Fernand Léger, Marie Laurencin, and Suzanne Valadon. Like the monuments, the paintings *Femmes dans un Intérieur*, *Personnages dans un Jardin*, *Portrait of Coco Chanel*, *Young Girl with Cat*, and *Louison and Raminou* reveal the complexity of French femininity as they reference various roles and influences held by modern women. Unlike the monuments, these paintings do so intentionally. The chapter begins with a look at two paintings created by avant-garde artist Fernand Léger in which modernity and tradition intersect in images of motherhood. An examination of his *Femmes dans un Intérieur* and *Personnages dans un Jardin* allows for a consideration of the ever-complicated relationship between the mother and modern woman (figs. 4.5 and 4.7). In *Femmes dans un Intérieur*, the inclusion of a clothed mother and child pair with three female nudes and the details that confuse the women’s relationship to the child allow for the possibility of many different maternal relationships. The figures in *Personnages dans un Jardin* similarly allude to alternative maternities as two women pose with one child as if both are mothers. The chapter then moves to a closer look at three paintings by Laurencin and Valadon in which the mother and modern woman types are not painted separately but comfortably brought together in the same figures. Valadon, in *Young Girl with Cat* and *Louison and Raminou* (figs. 4.10 and 4.11), reinvents the breastfeeding mother image, placing cats where her traditional compositions urge viewers to expect infants. In this way, she rewrites traditional mother and child imagery while simultaneously glorifying a feminine role outside of biological motherhood. Similarly, Laurencin’s *Portrait of Coco Chanel* (fig. 4.23) features a lapdog rather than child. In this image, as with Valadon’s compositions, Laurencin glorifies a modern maternal role but, in this case, for a living female icon. In all three
paintings, the artists glorify a “motherhood” that could allow their female protagonists the freedom and independence of a *femme moderne* rather than the constrictions of traditional stay-at-home care for multiple, biological children. Like de Lempicka’s flapper mother, then, these female figures combine aspects of both modern woman and mother. Though rather than a resounding emptiness, these paintings build back nontraditional meanings in the place of the traditions that de Chirico, de Lempicka, and Picabia unraveled.

The four chapters of this study thus progress from a wide contextual view of traditional motherhood created through images in magazines, newspapers, and posters to a politically accepted rhetoric of French motherhood (and disruptions to this supposedly collective view) in the form of state-sanctioned monument projects. From there, they then move to the rejection and dissolution of meaning in works by de Chirico, de Lempicka, and Picabia, and finally to the rewriting of the traditional mother icon in the paintings of Léger, Valadon, and Laurencin. Revealing a range of interpretations, this organization draws together diverse understandings and experiences of motherhood in France between 1910 and 1940. It also exposes the difficulties of maintaining the supposedly natural separation between motherhood and modernity and emphasizes often overlooked freedoms and possibilities offer in artistic representation. The chapters engage revisionist theories from the fields of cultural history and feminist art history in order to trace the importance of the mother figure as cultural icon and to explore the influence of ideal motherhood on expectations of and for living French women. At the same time, by examining the dichotomy of the mother and *femme moderne*, this study aims to trouble the mutual exclusivity of female roles. As with any representation, the mother figure plays into the inventive process of culture creation by standing in for an absent, though supposedly stable, referent. Contingency and fabrication, however, are a vital part of definitions and ideals of
maternity. Thus, even as the representation of motherhood created an impression of stable collective thought in early- to mid-twentieth-century France, it was an emblem in flux. Though many sources, from pronatalist to feminist texts and representations, held up the mother as traditional and easily understandable, a closer look reveals the complexity, mutability, and modernity of this supposedly stable figure.
CHAPTER 1
Ideal Mother: The Icon of French Motherhood in Visual Culture

Though the years from 1910 to 1940 serve as limits to the scope of this study, the themes and trends that defined French representations of motherhood during this period appeared long before the twentieth century. Beginning with the end of the French Revolution and gaining ever more momentum by the end of the nineteenth century, a desire to return to an abstract, ideal past prompted leaders and other influential commentators to urge women “back” to their natural role of motherhood. Looking first at nineteenth-century thought, then, this chapter explores the creation and maintenance of the French cultural ideal of motherhood. The cultural preoccupations as well as the cultural and historical contexts that defined the three decades from 1910 to 1940 sustained a context of cultural conservatism. Certainly themes shift and specific ideas changed as France faced new challenges and successes, yet many themes remained consistent across more than a century of visual culture: motherhood as woman’s natural role; motherhood as stability; the home as the best (and often only) place for mothers; and mothers as guardians of morality, to name a few. Thus, for the most part, the visual and textual images of motherhood discussed in this chapter represent attempts to manifest the stability and tradition that artists discussed in later chapters worked to disrupt and revise.

Working to promote a sense of nationalism and patriotic duty as well as an unchanging (and thus fictional) status quo, commentators from both sides of the political and social spectrums employed a number of these generalized and often allegorized tropes. In many instances, various political and social leaders, commercial enterprises, journalists, novelists and
others crafted the theme of motherhood to bolster male power and agency by relegating women to the *foyer*, or family home. A regular repetition of the same visual tropes over these three decades also fostered a sense of longstanding conservative ideals and tradition. At the same time, wide (even supposedly universal) acceptance of the mother and the various themes she came to represent, also inspired other influential figures, like feminist Nelly Roussel, to attempt to use the mother figure and related conceits for progressive ends. As they continued to picture the happy mother in the home, however, even liberal sources upheld many of the traditions inherent in the ideal of motherhood. Thus even as this chapter highlights some of the ways in which images of motherhood are not always as straightforward as they may seem, its primary focus is the attempt to maintain the illusion of constancy. Serving as a foundation and a foil for the examination of the monuments and paintings to follow, this chapter will emphasize the consistent patterns and tropes that have led to the impression that images of mothers are, at their core, representations of tradition.

**Early Pronatalism and Ideals of Motherhood in France**

Though this study focuses on the twentieth century, French concern over low birthrates and flagging population growth claims a much longer history, dating back at least to the reign of Louis XIV.¹ Among other social and political concerns, economic crises, losses in war, and decreased birthrates frequently renewed long-standing fears of dénatalité, or depopulation, as well as related attempts to increase the numbers of French bodies in the Hexagon.² From the advent of

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² Carol Blum also argues that during the Enlightenment influential critics used depopulation as an effective weapon against the King and the Catholic Church, both of whom they held responsible for diminishing population growth. In this vein, a large body of publications claimed that strengthening population numbers was of utmost importance to France’s future. “For better or for worse,” Blum writes, “populationism in eighteenth-century France drew private
the Third Republic, the defeat suffered by France in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 sparked one such renewal of pronatalist sentiment and the hope that an increased population could help the country overcome the humiliation of defeat and, moreover, prevent future attacks and losses. According to Anne Cova, by the turn of the twentieth century the fear of degeneration and decadence spread by resulting post-war movements had escalated to the level of national obsession. Between 1870 and 1914, by her count, French authors published 250 books on topics from the newly invented term “demography” to health and hygiene, all with the intent to boost population growth. Together with frequent articles appearing in newspapers and journals from *Le Temps* to feminist papers like *La Fronde* and *Le Droit des femmes*, such publications indicate the extent of popular interest in this perceived crisis. Charts and statistics, sensationalized tales of couples refusing to have children, and pleas for French citizens to fulfill their patriotic duty to populate their beloved country, all played on an anxiety about military threats from more populous neighbors and cast pronatalism and pronatalist activities as the only possible solution to France’s problems. In addition, pronatalism gained favor amidst a variety of official organizations, political parties, and factions. Thus, during the early Third Republic in France, a need for the “defense,” “protection,” and “recovery” of a waning French nation and

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3 Recently, Margaret Andersen has written about the extent of this nineteenth-century pronatalist movement that even reached the colonies, as people pushed for the entire empire to “regenerate” and grow in strength. See: *Regeneration through Empire: French Pronatalists and Colonial Settlement in the Third Republic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).


5 Ibid., 29-30.
race swept the country, creating the foundation for fears that would continue to develop between 1910 and 1940.

Combined with more abstracted fears of “degeneration” and “de-civilization,” widely-publicized statistics and Neo-Lamarckian theory seemed to bring the idea of a “dying” France into reality. In 1890, 1892, and 1895, the number of deaths surpassed the number of births in France, causing population numbers to fall. Even after the turn of the century, statistics showed no improvement: the census of 1911, for example, reveals 776,000 deaths and only 742,000 births. Moreover, beginning in the 1870s and taking on a new urgency with the 1892 publication of Max Nordau’s Entartung (Degeneration), neo-Lamarckian evolutionary theory enabled a range of scholars and critics to create convincing theories of cultural demise during the fin-de-siècle. Nordau’s work, for example, centered on evidence of physical and mental degeneration in European societies. Insisting on the need for a renewal of European society, he especially targeted France, where he claimed such deterioration first came to light. Supposedly the first country to show evidence of decline, France was highlighted as particularly vulnerable in Nordau’s book. Combined with the recent loss of the Franco-Prussian War and the marked

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6 I say “seemed” here because statistics were not always what they appeared. For example, French commentators generally assumed and/or claimed that Germans were immune to the “population crisis” when, in reality, their numbers were also decreasing.

7 Cova, Maternité et Droits, 35.


10 Nordau writes that for many reasons, including the “frightful loss of blood” during the Napoleonic wars and the Revolution, France sustained “a more violent shock than other nations more robust and more capable of resistance,” Degeneration, trans. from second edition of the German work (London: William Heinemann, 1898), 42.
decline of France’s leadership in the sciences, such theories only further fueled fears of a weakening country.\textsuperscript{11} To counter the fears that they caused, as with fears of population decline, neo-Lamarckian theory and theorists offered a solution—if French citizens were willing to take on the responsibility to help save their country they could repopulate and regain their strength.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, such theories combined with contemporary statistics concerning population growth to encourage a nationwide effort to overcome the threats to national security through regeneration.

Two factors, however, cast French citizen’s dedication to regeneration as questionable: the perceived popularity of neo-Malthusian methods of birth control coupled and a strong impression that \textit{femmes modernes} refused to bear children. Based on the principle that overpopulation could destroy a country, Malthusian, and later neo-Malthusian, theory argued for an intentional and active lowering of the birthrate through various methods of contraception, including abstinence, delayed marriage, and various forms of prophylactics. Many people and organizations, however, considered such a philosophy a “slow but sure poison, from which France will die little by little.”\textsuperscript{13} Of particular concern was the idea of women learning and using a variety of contraceptive methods that would allow them to go on a \textit{grève des ventres} or strike of the womb. This strike, an idea originally put forth by the League for Human Regeneration founders neo-Malthusians Paul Robin and Eugène Humbert, threatened to take power away from


\textsuperscript{12} In contrast to Darwin’s theories of randomized natural selection, neo-Lamarckian theory emphasized agency and Transformism, which promised the possibility of regeneration. \textit{Ibid., 220}.

\textsuperscript{13} Unidentified author, “La Dépopulation,” \textit{Le Temps}, November 25, 1901.
potential fathers and instead place it in women’s hands, allowing, coercing, or even forcing them to refuse their “natural” and “essential” role of motherhood.\(^{14}\)

Indeed, many news articles, books, and even plays emphasized the innocent bride as the prime target for neo-Malthusian agendas. According to a front-page article in the newspaper *Le Matin*, for example, widely-circulated pamphlets written by associations offering neo-Malthusian education specifically targeted a vulnerable female audience. “At each assembly,” the article quotes one such pamphlet, “there is a course of practical study on the diverse methods of avoiding conception. *Women are especially invited.*”\(^{15}\) At a time when sexual education for women was disparaged, such courses represented a progressive opportunity to learn about this subject and ultimately gain more agency over conception. In addition to supporting women’s freedom to consent to or refuse motherhood, many supporters of neo-Malthusianism also held up their practices as providing much needed aid to potential “filles-mères” (young, unmarried mothers) over whom men held the “abusive power” of refusing recognition of illegitimate children.\(^{16}\) More conservative parties, however, refused to acknowledge the benefits of such practice. They cast neo-Malthusian practices as “criminal” and the supposed aid they could provide as mere legitimizing pretexts for unspeakable acts, including rising numbers of

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\(^{14}\) Ultimately and perhaps more famously, this notion would be adopted by activist Nelly Roussel, who believed in the vital importance of sexual freedom for women. For more on the history of the *grève des ventres* as it relates to Malthusian propaganda and population growth in France see: Francis Ronsin, *La grève des ventres: propaganda malthusienne et baisse de la natalité en France, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980).


\(^{16}\) The problem of young and unmarried mothers greatly concerned many different factions from the late-nineteenth-century onward. Feminists especially publicized the plight of these women who had no rights and received little to no aid from the State. These women were frequently cast as victims by their supporters to counter the stereotype of the temptress. For more on this subject see: Cova, *Maternité et droits des femmes.*
abortions.\textsuperscript{17} Also of great concern was the possibility that the power offered to women by Malthusian and neo-Malthusian practices would promote selfishness and egoism and draw impressionable women away from the \textit{foyer}, or home, and into the role of the New Woman. In a cultural climate where pronatalism enjoyed official approval and a huge spectrum of popular support and where women were frequently cast as inactive, second-class citizens, any potential benefits of neo-Malthusian practices were thus overshadowed by fears of population decreases and female independence.

The emphasis on women as playing a central role in depopulation, rather than other factors such as high infant mortality rates that indeed played a major role in decreased population numbers, ultimately drew society’s attention to the figure of the mother and her responsibility to her nation. Building on Rousseau’s eighteenth-century philosophy of female domesticity, bourgeois French society persisted in the belief that women were \textit{essentially} virtuous wives and mothers and that in those virtuous roles formed the moral foundation of the family and the nation.\textsuperscript{18} Motherhood as a bourgeois ideal was a universalizing concept that implied a married woman whose life played out mostly in the home.\textsuperscript{19} Self-sacrificing, mild-mannered, and submissive, she took responsibility for her children’s early education but always deferred to her

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\textsuperscript{17} Unidentified author, “Pour les Innocents: l’Académie de médecine s’élève dans le Matin contre le suicide inconscient des femmes et l’assassinat permanent des enfants,” \textit{Le Matin}, December 26, 1910.
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\textsuperscript{19} Such an idea necessarily excluded any consideration of the working-class and rural women whose families relied on their labor outside the home to survive. In her conclusion to a study of women’s work in nineteenth-century France, particularly the garment trade, Judith Coffin writes, “Casting men as producers and women as consumers, men as breadwinners and women as secondary wage earners, men’s sphere as the shop and women’s as the home distorted perceptions of women’s role both in the family and in France’s labor force, constricting interpretations of what working-class families needed and how they operated.” For more on this topic see, Judith Coffin, \textit{The Politics of Women’s Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), especially chapters 4 and 5 and the conclusion.
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husband’s judgment on the best interests of the family and home. Despite the nineteenth-century spread of feminist activism and increasing opportunities for education, professional success, and independence for women, new advances in science and medicine emphasized sexual difference and provided evidence that the details of women’s anatomy and physiology primed them to bear and raise children. Moreover, organizations like the Nationalist Union founded in 1898 by Marie Maugeret and Marie Duclos, insisted on the importance of stay-at-home motherhood. Maugeret and Duclos argued that women who assumed this “natural” role could ensure a stable and even racially homogenous “pays réel” strong enough to defend against the threat of outsiders. Focusing attention on the bourgeois ideal of the mother as vital to national health and strength, commentators thus ultimately placed women at the heart of issues of national security.

The equation between well-behaved women and national stability, however, was not new: it had roots in Rousseau’s theories as well as legends of monstrous women like the pétroleuses of the Paris Commune (fig. 1.1). Polar opposite of the stay-at-home mother, the fire-setter was a symbol of national and social unrest. After the Paris Commune uprising, in which women held a small but active role, a wide range of images and texts equated the

20 In truth, feminist activists along with female professionals widely accepted sexual difference and hoped to attain equality through difference, rather than insisting they were “just like men.” See: James F. McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002), 101.


revolutionary woman with social disorder and loss.\textsuperscript{23} The ugly, haggard, and violent \textit{pétroleuse}, or fire-setter, became the symbol of women’s participation in the insurrection, embodying the message that “men could expect anarchy and destruction if women escaped the home and the bonds of civilization.”\textsuperscript{24} The fire-setters were “unnatural beings” who refused to submit to male authority, attacked and destroyed property, and even turned their own children against the state. In this way, the image of the \textit{pétroleuse} played on more general fears that independent women “would forget their femininity, devour their (male) children, and destroy civilization.”\textsuperscript{25}

Predicated on the same thinking as Rousseau’s \textit{essential} femininity and domesticity, the mother at the hearth became the supposed antidote to the corruption and upheaval that the fire-setter represented.

Despite the counter-revolutionary and conservative origins of the iconic mother, however, liberal organizations and factions in the nineteenth century also promoted ideals of motherhood. Feminist journals such as \textit{L’Harmonie sociale} published articles supporting the mother’s national importance. For example, municipal councilor of Paris Dr. Henri Thulié’s 1893 article entitled “La mère fait la race” declared that it was the mother who invigorated the country and whose intelligence formed the foundation of education in France. “The stronger and more intelligent she is,” he wrote, “the more noble her character, the more powerful the race will

\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, Lisa Beckstrand writes that eighteenth-century medical and philosophical theories that redefined female nature “focused on the female body as the locus of women’s intellectual inadequacies and promulgated the idea that women who acted outside of the confines of their physiological nature were desensitized, unfeminine, and ultimately deviant.” \textit{Deviant Women of the French Revolution}, 11.


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
Moreover, because of the powerful appeal of the saintly mother, many feminist activists, like Nelly Roussel, as well as many women’s publications used the trope of motherhood to create a more appealing image of independent women. In publications like *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse*, successful women writers were not shown actively producing their work, but as beautiful, bourgeois mothers doting on their children, creating the illusion that career women did not reject traditional bourgeois values but still highly prized their husbands, families, and beautiful homes (fig. 1.2). As Rachel Mesch has argued, “rather than books becoming substitutes for babies, and…leading to infertility, depopulation and…the collapse of French society, books and babies appeared side by side,” calming fears and attempting simultaneously to gain more freedom for contemporary women. Still, even as they accompanied texts promoting women’s work, these images frequently promoted an uncritical image of traditional bourgeois ideals. The mothers shown in these representations still appeared contentedly embracing or posing with their beautiful children and were still most frequently pictured inside the home. This promotion of motherhood thus had an unintended effect: even liberal sources appeared to endorse, and thus reinforce, the ideal of the dutiful, self-sacrificing, mother at home.

By 1909, then, when the doctor Sicard de Plauzoles published *La Maternité et la Défense Nationale contre la Dépopulation*, motherhood as social duty had become a major focus in French culture. Building on assumptions and themes that were present in a variety of publications of the time, *La Maternité* uses depopulation as grounds to rally social support for French mothers that would allow them to fulfill their “vital” social role. It begins with a detailed

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presentation of the steady decline in the French birthrate (from 40 births per 1,000 inhabitants in 1778 to only 19.7 births per 1,000 in 1907).\textsuperscript{28} Ultimately, however, de Plauzoles widens his scope to show that Italy, Germany, England, and Belgium, all share France’s problems with population decline.\textsuperscript{29} Using the pervasiveness of this supposed crisis to heighten a sense of urgency, De Plauzoles insists that society must support mothers, for “woman, in her role as creator, is a social being…in the same vein as the soldier, the defender of our soil.”\textsuperscript{30} By promoting and even financially supporting women’s duty of motherhood and her place in the home, European nations could “assure the steady development of the population and the strengthening of the species.”\textsuperscript{31}

Emerging as the foil for the ideal mother, toward the end of the nineteenth century the figure of the New Woman appeared. A female type that would remain prevalent through the early-twentieth century, the New Woman sat in uncomfortable opposition to the traditional \textit{femme au foyer}. Unlike the happy mothers promoted in nineteenth-century women’s magazines and other sources, the women supposedly described by this label challenged pervasive gender norms of French culture in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as they sought not just work but professions outside the home, took up feminist activism, either entered non-traditional marriages or remained single, and, most frightening of all, refused to have children.

\textsuperscript{28} Such statistics did not take into account infant mortality rates.

\textsuperscript{29} Sicard de Plauzoles, \textit{La Maternité et la Défense Nationale contre la Dépopulation} (Paris: V. Giard & E. Brière, 1909), 3 and 12. Sicard de Plauzoles would continue to be a major figure throughout the period from 1910-1940. He would be a key figure in the movement to prevent venereal disease, and the related push for sexual education for young adults in the 1920s and vice-president and president of the French league for the rights of Man from the 1930s to 1950s. Though an advocate for the abolition of prostitution, in these later offices he also pushed for the legalization of abortion and liberalization of contraception. The act of equating mothers and soldiers is a prevalent theme in the twentieth century and will be discussed at further length later in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 249.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 48.
What is more, because even progressive sources promoted the good mother as the epitome of French femininity, the figure of the New Woman could be perceived as threatening even in liberal circles. Though scholars have argued that the New Woman was more a literary creation than a lived reality, changes in fashion, the introduction of new technologies (especially the bicycle and, later, the car), and an increased presence of women in heretofore male-only professions (journalism, medicine, law) gave contemporaries reason to believe in her existence.

Dressed in loose-fitting clothing and riding a bicycle, any woman could be mistaken for the deviant New Woman, whose self-centered desires and behaviors threatened to unhinge French social order.

A theme in many articles and other texts, this greedy, educated, self-important, and, yes, “unnatural” New Woman also found her way into the visual culture of the early Third Republic. A prime example of the various stereotypes of modern women, the September 18, 1909 issue of the satirical publication *L’Assiette au beurre* dedicated a majority of its pages to the denigration of “feminists and feminisms.” Mocking the physical appearance and sexuality of feminists much as images of the pétrouleuses did before them, the magazine aims to work against counterparts like *Femina* to dissolve any feminist credibility. On the front cover, a group of old, pinched, grumpy, and, in some cases, green-faced women sit at the edge of a stage around a table (fig. 1.3). A central crone, dressed in black and with no neck to speak of, stands addressing the group. “What gives us power,” a caption below declares, “…is our chastity, our unwavering sexual abstinence….despite all of the male lust that is ever upon us.” Not only are these women

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32 Christine Bard, for example, shows how a majority of feminists and feminist groups rejected the controversial garçonne for fear that such an extreme image would hurt their cause. See Bard, *Filles de Marianne: Histoire des féminismes, 1914-1940* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), 207-9.

33 For the New Woman as literary creation see: Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*; Mesch, *Having it All in the Belle Époque*; and McMillan, *France and Women.*
shriveled and frightening, then, they are out of touch with reality, believing their haggard bodies capable of eliciting male desire. Continuing its attack on the New Woman, this issue of *L’Assiette au beurre* also includes the young, voluptuous temptress interested in everything but sex; the delusional old maid with a thin, sagging body who counts her blessings that she did not allow pregnancy and motherhood to ravage her silhouette; and the skinny, limping “brain” of a girl completely incapable of managing a household or raising children (figs. 1.4-1.6). The most frightening in the face of natalist fears emphasizes the incomprehensible cruelty and illogic of the New Woman (fig. 1.7). A bespectacled woman with elfin features and book tucked under her arm stands beside three large jars. Each fluid-filled glass vessel contains an infant and each jar is labeled with a name. A quote from a presumably feminist text serves as a caption: “Concerned with developing her intellectual faculties, but sensing that she should still be a mother, the woman of the future will be able to reconcile these two things very well; all it will take is knowing how to bear [*se donner*] less cumbersome and cheaper offspring [*postérité*] than in the past.”

Such images of women not only played on contemporary fears but also drew abstracted stereotypes into the realm of visual imagery. The terrifying modern woman now had a tangible form and could be recognized in daily life; any woman carrying books, riding a bicycle, or gathering in groups of other bourgeois women could pose a threat to society. Unlike the naïve and helpless young bride unable to resist the coercive tactics of neo-Malthusians, this woman consciously chose a subversive path. The emergence of the New Woman and the threats she posed to stability and tradition only strengthened a conservative seemingly immutable ideal of

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34 The magazine labels this quote: “Louise D…*L’Avenir de la femme.*” This source and its author, however, are not readily traced today.
motherhood. Though used to promote progressive causes like French feminism, the mother consistently placed women in a more isolated and seemingly less political role as a woman who stayed at home caring for multiple children and worrying little about her own needs and desires. Thus through a constant renewal of natalist fears as well as a publicized stand against neo-Malthusian practices and the cultivation of open antifeminist sentiments in texts and images, bourgeois French society of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries set the themes that would continue to persist in the coming decades.

1910s: Pre-War Years and World War I

By the beginning of the 1910s, depopulation and degeneration had become prevalent national issues in France. In fact, by 1911 book-length studies like Paul Strauss’s Dépopulation et Puériculture could believably claim that depopulation represented a “national peril.” Even before this, anxieties ran high as can be seen in a prominent, full-page article in the July 2, 1910 issue of the illustrated weekly, L’Illustration. Inspired by a recent piece entitled “Suicide of the French Race” by Dr. Jacques Bertillon, this article comes with its own foreboding title, “Our Race is in Peril.” Printed below a large graph depicting population growth in European countries from 1800 to 1910, it highlights the unfavorable comparison between France and its neighbors: while Belgium can claim a staggering 255 inhabitants per square kilometer and the ever-threatening Germany managed to more than double the number of its inhabitants (from 55 per square kilometer to 110) in just over a century, France’s population had increased by less than half (reaching only about 72 inhabitants per square kilometer) (fig. 1.8). “Our country…” the article reads, “is in the process of losing its lifeblood [forces vives].” If this trend continues,

author Albéric Cahuet concludes, France will not only lose the ability to defend itself against outside threat, but will also “forfeit its power as a great race that contributes to education, civilization, and colonial aspirations.” As the numerous citations within the body of this article suggest, depopulation (and even degeneration) greatly concerned numerous doctors, authors, scientists, and statisticians who tried in various ways to reach out to the general population.

Despite a continued sensationalizing of the population decrease, however, until the beginning of the First World War the mother did not fully realize her role as a national icon of regeneration. In the *Illustration* article cited above, for example, while the seriousness with which depopulation was discussed remained constant, mothers did not enter the discussion. Instead, during the first decade of the twentieth century, motherhood more commonly appeared in advertisements for consumer goods and as an ideal capable of validating women’s growing independence and agitation for rights. Both advertisements and feminist imagery, in responding to and promoting new trends in female independence, couched progressive attitudes toward women in the reassuring image of the loving mother. At the same time, the blending of modern styles and attitudes with motherhood in such representations suggested the possibility of a third option: modern motherhood.

With the advent of war, however, any hint of new possibilities for *mères modernes* quickly dissipated as textual and visual sources began reinforcing the iconic conventions and patriotic fervor of selfless motherhood. As male soldiers suffered at the front, mothers suffered in childbirth and both gave life to support their nation. After the war, the national focus on motherhood persisted as heavy losses further exacerbated fears of a dying nation. Pronatalist

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sentiment again swept conservative and liberal sectors alike as an artistic “return to order” inspired even artists to renew their focus on traditional tropes associated with the mother. At the same time, mothers appeared as important figures in the commemoration of the First World War. Thus, despite an early shift in this decade away from mothers as icons of regeneration, ultimately France saw a renewal of the emphasis on maternity as vital to the nation’s survival.

As they carefully shaped a positive and rather traditional view of motherhood written representations in prewar feminist magazines at the beginning of the decade did seem oddly demure. Between 1900 and 1914, feminism enjoyed something of a heyday. Previously small and disparate factions united to form a mass movement and together won new legal rights for women such as the ability to act as civil witnesses (1897), the right to keep their own earnings regardless of their marital status (1908), the right to vote in elections to the Conseil de Prud’hommes (the law of 27 March 1907), and the ability to file paternity suits (1912).37 The perceived victories that these new rights and this increased solidarity represented inspired increased efforts to agitate for even more rights, including suffrage.38 The pages of feminist publications like Jane Misme’s La Francaise were filled with stories about women converted to the cause. Reviews in La Française were dedicated to work by authors like Claire Galichon, whose three pro-feminist books grew out of an initial skepticism about the movement.39 Moreover, public figures like journalist and famed sociologist Jean Finot spoke out in the pages

37 McMillan, France and Women, 217.

38 Still, as war loomed in 1914, women’s issues again took backstage. An organized protest to be held “on the streets of Paris” in March of 1914, however, had such an embarrassingly small showing that the event was canceled. See the series of front-page articles in La Française: March 28, 1914 and April 4, 1914.

39 Recalling her change of heart, Galichon wrote that it took time for her to move past stereotypes like those presented in L’Assiette au beurre and realize that, indeed, “all women are feminists.” Claire Galichon, Ève Réhabilitée: Plaidoyer “Pro Femina,” (Paris: Librairie Générale des Sciences Occultes, 1909), 12.
of the newspaper against limiting scientific evidence and popularly held assumptions about binaries of the sexes. Science, he wrote, “does not give us the authority to draw conclusions in favor or against women.” Despite increased solidarity and support, feminist messages were still frequently couched in the “natural” framework of motherhood. Galichon’s “new Eve,” for example, though in various ways progressive, was still cast as “the perfect wife united completely to regenerated man, future Adam.” “It is rehabilitated Eve,” Galichon stressed, “who will bear children.” At this time, then, feminist texts embraced motherhood as a powerful role for women that spoke to women’s importance as French citizens and that could inspire many skeptics to support their cause. Certainly these sources, like the words and images in nineteenth-century women’s journals, reinforced stereotypes of motherhood. Simultaneously, however, such texts when further than their nineteenth-century counterparts in questioning traditional roles for women and thus hinted at the possibility for a more progressive, modern trope of motherhood.

Images promoted similar ideals as they gave form to this mère moderne. Much like publications from the belle époque, feminist and mainstream periodicals of this period continued to publish visual representations of modern women with their children, promoting a sense that they should be, first and foremost, mothers. A front-page image by Georges Lepape in the January 15, 1914 issue of Fémina, for example, depicts a woman, dressed in modern style and with a progressively short bob haircut, seated in front of a bassinet (fig. 1.9). Mother and

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40 Finot urged readers to resist the conclusion that men have the “largest brains and the highest intelligence” as well as the “most originality” while women “have a much greater stability and therefore more common sense.” “Les Sciences contra la Femme,” La Française, October 22, 1911.

41 Galichon, Ève Réhabilitée, 460. [Her italics.]

baby stare out at the viewer, the color scheme and other overlapping elements linking them to one another. Hooking her arm through a ribbon tied from the foot to the hood of the bassinette, the mother holds her infant’s rattle, absent-mindedly caressing its bulb. The baby, raising its left arm in the air, seems about to demand the return of its toy. The pair are seated outside under a tree, in a garden by the beach (la mère and la mer), with a small rustic house behind them—all suggesting woman’s connection to the natural world. Redefining the styles that supposedly marked out the subversive modern woman this image works to remind viewers that all women, regardless of their fashion, can feel the natural push to become mothers. But as it presents a mother styled in contemporary clothes and hair, it also hints at the possibility of a new modernized maternal figure.

Similarly, advertisements combined the image of independent woman with motherhood to play on a wide variety of desires and to target a wide-ranging consumer base. In a telling example, a full-page advertisement for Mors automobiles published in a 1910 issue of L'Illustration demonstrates the crossover in goals between these two types (fig. 1.10). Under the subtitle “Our artists in automobiles,” a photograph depicts a car and three people on a paved but deserted road that cuts through a forest of trees. The male chauffeur seems engaged in his duties, though the car is clearly stopped. A woman stands proudly just outside the back seat, her chest

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43 Also on the cover, the magazine advertises Colette’s short story “The first hours…” published inside. Set during the hours after a drugged birth, the story culminates in the young mother’s growing recognition of her child and the innate selfless love she feels for such a little creature. It is a complex and nuanced story of a mother’s natural, almost primal love for and bond with her child who is at first fearful that she does not feel the “grand élan” that she had been “promised.” The doubting mother is so fearful of being uncaring and even monstrous in her lack of feeling, that she does not realize the strength of her innate love for her child. The story ends, “She rests there, forgetting her exhausted body and her tormenting hunger. She rests there attentive, possessive (jalouse), anxious, ready to defend and to fight, and asks herself, unaware of her overflowing love [for her daughter]: ‘Do I love her?’” This mother’s love is so powerful that she forgets the stresses and pains of her own body, she forgets even her hunger. But it is so deep within her that it goes beyond a conscious awareness of her emotions. Colette, “Les premiers heures…” Femina (Jan. 15, 1914), 32.
puffed out and her arm akimbo. A very large brimmed hat frames her profile as she looks dramatically away from the viewer, her chin lifted in what seems an act of pride. She clearly has an air of independence and strength, and one would assume that this beautiful vehicle is the source of her haughty air but for another figure situated just behind her. Perched in the back seat sits a little girl dressed in a neat, white frock and frilly white hat, looking toward her mother. When considering the pair of figures, it appears possible that the mother’s glance is not a dramatic gesture of pride, but a pose struck for another photographer tasked with capturing a mother-daughter portrait. In any case, the presence of the little girl makes a reading of the woman’s proud stance less clear: is she showing off her car or her child? Further complicating matters, the caption beneath this image identifies the central figure as Madame Cécile Thévenet, “the delicious ‘Carmen’ of the Opéra-Comique.” In contrast to the dangerously sexy character this woman plays, then, this family scene captures Thévenet’s integrity and fulfillment as a good mother, all while advertising the luxury, modernity, and wholesome family values represented by Mors’s cars.

In many ways, such representations of modern women, in text and image, play against the prevalent and long-standing stereotyping of feminists as “unnatural” and masculine bolstered by critical, antifeminist representations like the 1909 issue of L’Assiette au beurre. At the same time, however, in many other sources motherhood and modernity, represented by the femme moderne, were kept at odds. Galichon captures the effect of such a dichotomy, explaining in one of her later pro-feminist works how she, like many others of her day, at one time believed that “to be feminist implied dressing like a man, or, at least, being content with unsightly suits…[and] a boyish haircut.” A woman could not, she believed, be a feminist while at the same time feeling
like and wishing to remain a woman.\textsuperscript{44} Certainly, a wide range of sources promoted this notion, and often mutually exclusive representations of the New Woman and the Mother even further perpetuated the idea that independent, forward-thinking modern women were cut from a different cloth.

In a 1910 issue of \textit{Art et décoration}, for example, an article on Auguste Roubille reproduces many of his poster designs and magazine illustrations over a spread of six pages. Two images, one a design for a poster and one for the cover of Louise Babet’s \textit{Le Livre des mères}, capture the mutual exclusivity of the two female types. On one page, we see an image of a modern woman, riding her bicycle and wearing a short, above-the-knee skirt and high socks (fig. 1.11). A dog prances along beside her and we can see a man on horseback in the background. In association with the horse and rider, this woman and her canine companion seem possibly to be on the hunt, and the object of her expedition is not difficult to guess given the stereotype of the New Woman as sex-crazed and man-hunting. Turning to the next page in the magazine, the reader is confronted with this woman’s supposed opposite: the mother (fig. 1.12). Wearing a long gray dress, this mother shows her humility in her fashion. A high collar and billowing long-sleeves modestly hide all of her body except on her face and hands. Accompanied only by her infant, she is lost in admiration as she kisses her child tenderly on the forehead. Intended for widespread consumption, not to mention the viewership they would receive in the pages of \textit{Art et décoration}, these images insist on the division between \textit{femme moderne} and \textit{mère}. The opposing features of these two female figures and, within the context of the magazine, their placement on opposite sides of a page, strongly reinforce the dichotomy between independent and “proper” women.

\textsuperscript{44} Galichon, \textit{Ève Réhabilitée}, 25-6.
With the beginning of World War I, a return to conservative ideals only reinforced the dichotomy of independent women and mothers. The trope of the monstrous feminist again gained popularity as conservative sentiment cast any woman living a non-traditional lifestyle as unnatural. As early as December 1914, an article in the feminist periodical *L’Essor Féminin* entitled “Pourquoi le féminisme fait-il peur aux hommes?” laments the recurrence of anti-feminist misconceptions. Men fear, the article explains, that women in general “are losing their femininity,” that they no longer take care of their appearance, and that they “are becoming aggressive.” The men also believe that working women “are losing their moral dignity,” and any time they meet a pretty woman interested in feminism they say “You are much too pretty to concern yourself with that!”

In contrast, the mother re-emerged at this time as a symbolic and universal figure who could save and support France in both the present and the future. Attempting to come to terms with the first “total” war fought in Europe, many commentators stressed the vital link between women’s efforts on the home front and soldier’s efforts on the front line. Political officials and other commentators stressed a maintenance of the status quo through the normalizing of traditional gender roles. While men were primarily cast as soldiers, Susan R. Grayzel explains, “debates about women became debates about mothers,” figures who enabled “appeals to women across region, ethnicity, class, and even nation.” Moreover, she argues, by offering women a “status equivalent to the soldier” motherhood provided “a means by which to target and unify all

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women, to make them feel that they, too, had an essential part to play in supporting the war.”

Books like Jules Combarieux’s *Les jeunes filles françaises et la Guerre* (1916) insisted on the importance of women’s work for the war effort by capturing the “virile heroism” of which women working for the war effort were capable. According to the book’s introduction, written by Jacques Flach, French women of all beliefs and of all classes “have accomplished with a fullness of heart, a plenitude of spirit that renders them equal to the exploits of our combatants.” Of course, this equality with soldiers was based on a woman’s ability to take on a motherly role.

In fact, texts like a 1915 pamphlet produced and circulated by the Association Nationale Française pour la Protection Légale des Travailleurs demonstrate how a language of comparison emerged as motherhood was linked closely to soldiery. In this pamphlet the mother becomes “une blessée,” a woman wounded, and thereby is linked, through her experience of pain, to the soldier’s experience of pain. Through such associations between mothers and soldiers, Grayzel observes, “‘honor’ had returned to the French woman,” as her experience of suffering, both in childbirth and in her firsthand experience of warfare (both aerial and chemical) situated her as the equivalent of French men. The ideal soldier and ideal mother thus enabled commentators to stress politically and socially useful tropes of masculinity and femininity that, through repetition

47 Ibid.


49 Ibid.

50 Quoted in Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War*, 107, and 7-8.

51 New technologies that enabled aerial and chemical warfare changed everyone’s experience of the hostilities. Ibid., 204. This will be discussed further in chapter 3, Emptiness: Questioning the Ideal of Motherhood through Absence.
and force, ultimately overshadowed other possible, and certainly any progressive, definitions of masculinity and femininity. Once again, the mother became vital to national stability and strength, and women were called to serve their country as mothers, as men were called to serve as soldiers.\(^5^2\)

Of course, as a mother, the woman dedicated to the war effort was primarily charged with fighting the country’s “interior enemy:” depopulation. In the face of major losses in battles like those of the Marne and Verdun, books like F. A. Villermet’s *La mobilisation des berceaux (The mobilization of the cradles)* (1917) and J.A. Doléris’s *Néo-malthusianisme, maternité et féminisme, éducation sexuelle* (*Neo-Malthusianism, Maternity and Feminism, Sexual Education*) (1918), called women to accept their mission to become mothers and win “the second victory, the definitive victory” against Germany by affirming the “great crusade in favor of motherhood.”\(^5^3\) The heightened wartime anxiety over population decline even appeared in feminist texts like *La Française*. On the front page of the May 12, 1917 issue, a map of France appeared next to an article on depopulation. This map, courtesy of the Alliance Nationale de l’Accroissement de la Population, shows population decline and growth by department. The map is overwhelmed by the black of decline, while very few departments sport the white of population growth. Perhaps more telling, and more terrifying for contemporary audiences, the map shows large gaps in the border where population decline, according to widely accepted military belief, has rendered France vulnerable to attack. Thus, even in the feminist press a need to replenish the population appeared.

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\(^5^2\) Very little consideration seems to have been given to infertility.

While the factory work and other “masculine” jobs that women took on were crucial to the war effort, the idea that women were “truly” mothers allowed for insistence that this work was only temporary. Indeed, many sources downplayed its importance, while emphasizing women’s capacity for childbirth and child-rearing. During the war, propaganda and poster campaigns made significant contributions to the ideal of motherhood as women’s “natural” and patriotic role by emphasizing and normalizing the close association between women, earth, soil, fecundity, and France. They also began more frequently to feature representations of young girls and their dolls in attempt to create a hopeful image of generations of mothers to come. A war poster produced by the Section Cinématographique de l’Armée Française, for example, shows three women at work in front of a shadowy allegorical image that recalls both Victory and France anthropomorphized as Marianne (fig. 1.13). On the left, a woman works at a machine, her simple blue dress suggesting a factory uniform, while on the right a woman dressed in stereotypical “peasant” clothing, complete with a headscarf and sabots (clogs), works the earth with a pitchfork. Centrally located, directly under the allegorical figure in the background and surrounded, as the farmer, by wisps of crops and a basket filled with harvested goods, sits a nursing mother. The baby in her arms cannot be clearly identified as boy or girl, but an older daughter to the woman’s right holds up a small white letter. Though we cannot know what the letter contains (good news or bad) it stands in for the missing pater familias. The little girl’s apron and tight embrace of her doll echo her mother’s apron and child, and foreshadow this young girl’s patriotic role. Thus, as this image suggests, motherhood, much like farming and factory work, is essential to the national cause. But as her position within the composition and relation to the allegorical figure suggest, the mother is the most essential of all.
Other posters build on such themes and, in some cases, further exaggerate the connection between mothers and nature. One widely circulated poster, “Soignons la Basse-Cour,” plays with the idea of the mother hen or “mère poule.” Funded and produced around 1918 by the city of Paris and the Girls’ School of Avenue Daumesnil, it displays a student’s drawing of a black hen sitting on top of a mountain of eggs (fig. 1.14). Though both hen and eggs occupy about half of the poster’s length, the hen seems dwarfed by her produce. Eggs overflow and tumble down the pile and even break through the thin brown border around the scene, seemingly ready to fall out at the viewer at any moment. The blue background of the poster, the hen’s red comb and wattle, and the white of the eggs, patriotically recall the tricolor of the French flag. The surrounding caption reads, “Let’s take care of the farm: I am a good, brave war hen. I eat little and produce a lot.” Despite the lack of human figures in this poster, the imagery is thinly veiled. Because this message of consuming less and producing more occurred repeatedly during war time, typically with human women and children, the comparison would have been apparent.

In another widespread poster from 1918, printmaker Victor Prouvé combines text and image to create a similar message, but this time, more typically, with human figures (fig. 1.15). “Let’s eat less bread…less fat…less sugar,” reads the text, “Many people would do better if they ate and drank less.” This time, however, the accompanying image depicts a family dinner set in

54 These bright colors, along with the unusual perspective and simple drawing style, set this type of poster (one of many designed by school girls aged 13-16) apart from the otherwise typical war poster style: “sober compositions in which color had been virtually banished in favor of a self-consciously artful hand-drawn line.” Mark Levitch, “Young Blood: Parisian Schoolgirls’ Transformation of France’s Great War Poster Aesthetic,” in Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture, ed. Pearl James (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 145.

55 “Soignons la Basse-Cour: Je suis une brave poule de guerre. Je mange peu et produis beaucoup.” The Library of Congress translates “brave” as “fine.” In French “brave” can mean either “brave/courageous” or “good/honest” and thus captures a double-meaning that is difficult to reproduce with one word in English.

56 “Bien des gens se porteraient mieux s’ils mangeaient et buvaient moins.”
the dining room of what appears to be a respectable middle-class household. A gracious mother figure in a simple two-piece black dress and apron offers a table full of children a non-descript but pleasantly steaming plate of food. Three children and one baby eagerly await their meal. The eldest girl offers the baby some water from a clear pitcher, already practicing for her future maternal role. To complete the scene, a dog waits patiently and loyally by the eldest son’s side. The single plate of food to share and the basket at the left corner of the table with a thin loaf of bread demonstrate this family’s frugality. Though the message “I produce a lot” is not in the text, the four children attest to this mother’s contribution to the country.

Together, human and hen alike insist on the importance of abundant production combined with moderate to minimal consumption. Moreover, they suggest that during wartime all the living creatures in France must band together to support their country. The hens must eat less but produce mountains of eggs. Women must feed their families creatively with small portions but continue to bear offspring. Indeed, French mothers between 1914 and 1918 were expected to not only survive on less but to produce more children than before. In these two images, as in many others of the time, it is the maternal role that links humans and nature and that calls people back to the earth and their “biological” duties.

In addition to posters, war bonds, and other more popular forms of visual culture, the fine arts also turned to the figure of the mother as an emblem of patriotism, hope, and classical revival. After the advent of war, artists like Gino Severini moved from modern experiments in form and color to more realistic and demure images of motherhood. Most famously associated with Italian Futurism, Severini broke completely with his modernist style after the beginning of World War I, creating images like *Motherhood* (1916) (fig. 1.16). A young mother is dressed in

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57 This poster is more typical of wartime imagery: black and white line drawing, sober but forcefully artistic style.
simple clothing that, though modern in its simplicity, suggests a certain timelessness. Posed in front of a non-descript background, she cradles a nursing infant in her lap. The carefully rendered fullness of her exposed breast as well the baby’s plump features and long body speak to the abundant nourishment she provides. For Kenneth Silver, this work is “pointedly unprovocative” and “the blandest kind of representation.” It seems, however, that at least certain contemporaries did not agree with this assessment. Artist Amédée Ozenfant, for example, reproduced this painting in the final issue of the avant-garde journal L’Elan, and André Salmon urged Severini to exhibit the work at a show at the Galerie Barbazangue. The wider contemporary acceptance of such “poor” work speaks to its cultural appeal.

Indeed in 1918, art critic Camille Mauclair famously articulated new guiding principles for modern art, applauding those artists, like Severini, who had moved toward more traditional subjects and styles while at the same time urging those artists who had not to move away from the experimental “-isms” and abstractions that had defined the early decades of the twentieth century. Tellingly, he wrote, “All our artistic activity should be a return of passion for our mother. By this love, intensified by suffering, we will again become classicists.” Thus during the war, the mother became for modern artists and art critics the benchmarks of a classical revival of solidarity and stability. Through this figure, they connected to a wider public and emphasized important national themes, like solidarity and strength, that were intended to counterbalance the uncertainty and violence of war.


59 Ibid., 89.

60 Camille Mauclair, L’Avenir de France (Paris: F. Alcan, 1918), 525. Quoted in this English translation in, Silver, Esprit de Corps, 98.
After the armistice of November 11, 1918, France moved from a period of war to a period of commemoration, and mothers became key figures in monuments and commemorative ritual as bearers of national memory. As Daniel J. Sherman observes, despite the push to maintain gender norms during the war, the relationship between the sexes did not remain unaltered, as, in the absence of so many men, women took on jobs, ran households, and even became sole breadwinner for their family. In this light, women represented as allegories on war memorials could have given the impression that women themselves had a direct link to the nation, a political identity, an active voice.\textsuperscript{61} When female allegories were cast as mothers, this tension dissolved. “Likening female figures to mothers served twin purposes,” writes Sherman: “it domesticated the abstract forces represented, notably the nation, and implicitly cast as normative the domestic and gender relations that the war had disrupted.”\textsuperscript{62} In fact, the idea of the mourning mother resonated so well in popular culture that the act of building monuments was often discursively cast as “the act of a ‘grateful mother,’” and grieving transformed into a task assigned to wartime and postwar women.\textsuperscript{63} This connection between mourning and motherhood ultimately positioned mothers, as Grayzel observes, as “a bearer of memory for the nation of her fallen son.”\textsuperscript{64}

In the monuments themselves, mothers appeared with fallen soldiers, but more often with small children—the legacy of those soldiers and symbols of reconstruction and regeneration. Often, these women visually adhered to their role as keepers of memory, as they appeared to

\textsuperscript{61} Sherman, \textit{The Construction of Memory}, 201.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 202.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 203; and Grayzel, \textit{Women’s Identities at War}, 236.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 226.
guide the children in acts of remembrance. Thus, in commemoration as in wartime, mothers took on an association with soldiers, though ultimately imagery made clear that while women may have been the equivalent of the soldier, they were far from his equal. Rather, they were the hope of the future as the potential bearers of future soldiers. In Poulbot’s *Encore des gosses et les bonhommes* (1918) one of hundreds of cartoons captures this role as a small girl is cast in the role of mother (fig. 1.17). Three small children occupy the foreground in a cemetery. A young girl carries a large bouquet of flowers while to the left a smaller child clings to her coattails. A third girl placed slightly in front of them stops to speak, her hand gesturing off the page to the right. “The monument to the soldiers?...I’m going there, too,” she says. A representation of the widely accepted behavior of women, this image is both more tragic (are these war orphans?) and more hopeful (these little girls already know their patriotic duty) than if it were adults pictured. As children, these figures represent the future of France and the hope that women would continue to understand their role to honor the men who sacrificed their lives to the state and to bear children.

Though at the beginning of this decade the mother was less a national icon of regeneration than an ideal available to validate feminist causes and sell consumer goods, after the war the French people refocused on the possibilities inherent in this idealized traditional figure. The fears of depopulation and degeneration that books like Strauss’s *Dépopulation et Puériculture* and journals like *L’Illustration* brought out at the beginning of the 1910s only increased during and after World War I. In wartime, avant-garde artists like Severini even joined in the wider trend to look back to an idealized past and attempted to bring the best qualities of tradition to the present. In light of the fears of a dying country and the belief that a look into the

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65 Sherman, *The Construction of Memory*, 237. For further discussion of mothers and commemoration see chapter 2.
past could remedy France’s present problems, the mother gained power as a cultural icon. During this decade, then, as the mother helped to counteract negative images of feminists and sell products from encyclopedias to automobiles, representations of motherhood also became synonymous with the comfort of past traditions and the hope that convention could save the country in the aftermath of a devastating war.

1920s and 1930s: The Interwar Years

As foreshadowed by Mauclair’s insistence on the “return of passion for our mother,” during the interwar period, images of motherhood in the fine arts, popular arts, and society in general represented the force of conservative backlash and a related desire to “return” to better times. Despite a need for women to remain in factory work in the face of the country’s heavy losses, historians like Yvonne Knibiehler and Catherine Fouquet have shown how the period after the war saw the first systematic campaign to “ramener la mère au foyer,” or to bring the mother back home.66 In the face of social, economic, and political crisis, French politicians and other influential figures and factions urged women “to leave the workforce and concentrate on having or raising children, thereby resolving at a stroke, unemployment, which was seen only as a male issue, depopulation, problems of social order, and regenerating the economy.”67 Of course, such campaigns once again involved looking past the lived reality of French women and to an abstracted ideal. Moreover, as chronicled in texts like the pamphlet “Les Françaises devant l’Opinion masculine” (1922), renewed efforts to gain women’s suffrage after the war were met


with hostility and dismissal. “Never has general opinion held women so low,” laments author Aurélie de Faucambarge (dite “Aurel”). Of course, this was only true of general opinion concerning women in their capacity as independent French citizens. By contrast, the mother, especially the stay-at-home mother, was lauded: unofficial, and later official celebrations of Mother’s Day as well as the May 26, 1920 inauguration of a Médaille des Familles Françaises placed public emphasis on the glory of motherhood. Bound to representations from the past, in great part through Catholic associations with the Virgin Mary, mothers provided a link back to something timeless and traditional as well as forward to the regeneration and flourishing of France. This section will thus explore traditional motherhood as antidote to the loss of war and fears of flagging national security as well as the effects of new birth control legislation and changes to the Civil Code on women’s freedom, and the ramifications of the decreased support for the feminist movement and women’s work outside the home. These prevalent issues and changes along with the representation of mothers in paintings, postcards, and advertisements capture the conservative trends in France during this period. In addition, an examination of two exhibitions, the 1921 *Exposition nationale de la maternité et de l’enfance* and the 1937 *Exposition Internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne* shows the movement from an idealistic and hopeful call for happy mothers at the beginning of this period to a more anxious and even desperate cry for selfless mother-patriots as World War II loomed.

At a time when “the crisis of depopulation became the master narrative of postwar economic, military, political, and gender anxiety,” the mother was seen as France’s hope for a secure future. As in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, the mother’s regenerative capacity was again cast as a necessary remedy to the devastation caused by combat. Because France lost a

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higher percentage of its prewar male population than any of the other major combatants in World War I, it was easy for pronatalist propagandists to portray France as a weak nation, despite its recent victory. Ignoring other forms of national strength and military power such as weaponry or industrial production, pronatalist commentators placed the utmost emphasis on birthrate. Books, studies, and newspaper articles continued to cast insufficiently (re)productive women as the source of French weakness and the potential cause of France’s ultimate demise. As early as April 5, 1919, prominent pronatalist Gaston Rageot set the tone for interwar pronatalism in France, calling on French women to help protect their nation. He asked that they “would ‘make it a point of honor to conquer German women in peacetime, just as their husbands and brothers conquered German men during the war.’” Up to the start of World War II this perceived need to outgrow a powerful potential enemy only increased, particularly as French population growth continued to stall. By the 1930s, an added xenophobic fear of “contamination” only further aggravated pronatalist desires to ensure the future of the “true” French race. Thus, as influential commentators from all sectors grew increasingly obsessed with population growth mothers stood a(alone) as figures who could remedy a myriad of France’s national woes.

The ideal mother and the hopes she represented not only allowed many politicians, journalists, and artists in the 1920s to look toward a brighter future but also enabled them to repress the trauma of the devastation and loss from the war through a focus on maternal love and hope. According to scholars like Romy Golan and Silver, various attempts at such repression led

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69 “In order to exploit precisely these fears concerning the war and its aftermath,” writes Roberts, “natalist propagandists relied on an antiquated notion of military power, as based primarily on population.” Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, 106.

70 Quoted in Ibid., 90.

to a political as well as artistic rappel à l’ordre, or return to order, that heavily promoted the figure of the ideal mother. The movement’s look back toward “tradition” was steeped in nostalgia and memory and pushed artists to look beyond city life and back to French history for inspiration. While Pablo Picasso looked to past academicians like Ingres for inspiration, other artists like Jean Metzinger and André Derain turned to themes of agrarianism and rusticization of the modern. In all approaches, however, images of women, especially mothers, stood as representations of a grand past and the conventional ideals of family and farm life. In fact, Golan goes so far as to say that the body of the female figure in the guise of fertility “came to dominate the body politics of the rappel à l’ordre.” A figure whose “restored wholeness” could act as antidote to the trench-scarred landscape and the 400,000 wounded veterans, the mother figure acted as “nurturing consolation” to the French public. As she had in the past, this figure also embodied the promise of a regeneration and renewal of a strong (and victorious) France. Not only could she help move France back to pre-war gender distinctions and moral values, but she could also supply the country with the manpower needed to rebuild and later fortify the country from future attacks.

From the 1920s repetitive images of the mother and child trope on a variety of posters and postcards further reinforced the regenerative powers of maternity. A typical example of this theme, Henri Lebasque’s peace loan poster of 1920 shows a mother and her children posed in front of an image of men constructing buildings and plowing fields (fig. 1.18). The mother happily nurses her baby, her serene, smiling gaze communicating her contentment to the viewer,

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73 Ibid.
while a young girl, facing her mother, reads a book. The overlapping of these three figures and the proximity of baby and book imply that this young girl’s education will ultimately prepare her for her maternal duty. The conversation between the background and foreground figures, meanwhile, reminds the viewer that women’s peacetime work of reproduction and motherhood bolster men’s jobs in fields like construction and agriculture.

Similarly centered on this theme, a postcard produced by the Ligue pour le relèvement de la natalité française et la défense des familles nombreuses, also from 1920, shows a mother with four children (the coveted *famille nombreuse*) under the caption, “For Life…It is not enough to cry ‘Long live France!’ one must give it life! [*le faire vivre*]” (fig. 1.19). The mother points to a now familiar demographic map (the same reproduced in *La Française* and elsewhere during the war). Her large family provides a visual antidote to the fears bound up in the image of the map. At the same time, the way the young daughter in the foreground cradles her doll mimics the pose and expression of the mother in Lebasque’s poster, reassuring the viewer that this trend of repopulation and growth will continue with future generations. Reinforcing the family as the mother’s responsibility, all of these images in a range of media depict the mother and her children in isolation; together they make the family unit, and they will save France.

Indeed, as the focus on mothers as regenerators increased in the aftermath of war, the responsibility for human reproduction fell almost exclusively to French women. French men had already fulfilled their patriotic duties at the front and, on their return home, supposedly hoped to continue serving their country by returning to the workforce. They were thus excluded from a majority of pronatalist discussions. Instead, women took the brunt of the arguments and legislation against contraceptive use that arose during the interwar period. In 1920 and again in 1923 legislation passed that first imposed stiff penalties for the spread of any form of publicity
and sale of objects intended to promote abortion and the use of contraceptive devices, and then created stiffer penalties for doctors performing abortions and women who sought and received these procedures. The two most widely used forms of contraception, coitus interruptus and condoms, however, did not fall under this legislation. “Rather,” writes Roberts, “[this legislation] sought specifically to bring women’s sexual practices under legislative control by attacking abortion and female forms of contraception.”74 A front-page article in feminist newspaper La Française, tellingly entitled “Si la France se dépeuple, dit un homme, c’est la faute de femmes!” (“If France suffers depopulation, says a man, it’s the women’s fault!”) laments this focus on women as the problem. Author Juliette Raspail uses a recent exhibition on depopulation at the Musée social to point out that “Mr. Pronatalist” happily “ignores the two million bachelors” who refuse to father children.75 Most frequently, she argues, it is the man’s love of freedom and his desire to live the “easy life” that robs desiring women of their opportunity to become mothers. A majority of journalists, novelists, and politicians, however, assigned blame for population decline to the modern woman who rejected motherhood in favor of an “easier” and more independent life.

Within this context, French feminism continued to suffer. Though certain events did receive widespread news coverage, many of the most influential presses created images of feminists that once again recalled earlier caricatures and abstractions. The difference in attention given to the 10e Congrès de l’Alliance internationale pour le suffrage des femmes in conservative news sources like Le Matin as opposed to the feminist La Française is indicative of

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74 Roberts, Civilization without Sexes, 96 (emphasis mine).

75 Juliette François Raspail, “Si la France se dépeuple, dit un homme, c’est la faute des femmes!” La Française, March 24, 1923.
this rather hostile climate. One of only three front-page stories in *La Française*, Jeanne Bouvier’s article dedicated to the conference occupies three-fourths of the page (fig. 1.20). Reserving quoted passages for female speakers and strongly emphasizing the importance of the event, the overall tone of this article is hopeful as it insists on women’s active participation in society and calls for official recognition of their potential. “How far we’ve come in a quarter of a century,” Bouvier writes. “Is it not symbolic,” she asks, that the Sorbonne, the “temple of logic,” granted “feminist demands” “asylum” in their halls?

Reinforcing the positive themes within the text, the article also includes three images that work against stereotypes of the monstrous feminist. Two photographs depict older women in rather traditional feminine fashions, both wear their long hair carefully styled while one wears a lace collar and the other multiple pearl necklaces. Both women look directly out at the viewer, with confidence and understanding. Represented in a drawing, the third woman, Alliance president Margery Corbett-Ashby, is much younger than the other two. She wears no jewelry but her long hair is carefully pulled into a low bun. Her large eyes, small nose and chin, and delicate, smiling mouth create the impression of a youthful and approachable woman. The representations of these three women, then, capture a rather feminized side of these feminists, insisting on an aesthetic aspect of traditional femininity.

In *Le Matin*, by contrast, the article covering the conference on women’s suffrage is one of over a dozen front-page stories, though it does appear in a prominent location at the top righthand corner of the page. Under the title, which names only the male minister of public education Lucien Lamoureux, the text of this article does nothing to promote a pleasant or

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respectable image of these women or their cause. Indeed, the article’s third sentence oddly mentions the “clear sounds of toilets” that could be heard in the meeting hall. Reserving quotes for the men who spoke at this event and promoting the sense that women’s only possible place in politics would be to help men make decisions about issues pertaining to women and children, this article decidedly denies women a valid voice. Much as in La Française an accompanying image works to underscore the tone of the text, in this case a sketch, “A few female participants” (“Quelques congressistes”), by an illustrator identified only as Beringa (fig. 1.21). Unlike the photographs of men that also grace this newspaper’s front cover, the women in this image are shown in a caricature-like style that recalls the 1909 cover of L’Assiette au beurre.

Though not as grotesque as the pinched women with green skin, the representations of the conference participants in Le Matin do adhere to the stereotypes of the de-sexed feminist that were so prominent in the earlier publication. All the women represented sport bobbed haircuts and certain tell-tale modern fashions, close-fitting caps that let just the bottom of a bob peek out, dresses and coats without defined waists, etc. The three women shown most clearly in the foreground have exaggerated features. Two have large noses and elongated necks. Their bodies seem bony and their features give them a masculinized air. A third woman in a black coat is

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78 The mention of the noise from the bathroom diminished the importance of a conference held in the large amphitheater of the Sorbonne attended by more than 2,000 delegates from forty nations. The third sentence reads, “Si les murs étaient décorés des drapeaux de presque tous les pays du monde, les notes claires que jettaient dans la salle les toilettes, prouvaient qu’on ne sépare point dans le movement féministe le sentiment artistique des graves questions qu’on y traite.” It seems odd that in the “grand amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne” there would be such noises and even odder that it gets a mention in this article. These sounds certainly get no mention in La Française. In an equivalent passage in one of the articles on this conference in the June 5 issue of La Française, the flags and artistic choices are mentioned but noise does not come into play. « Plain à craquer, le grand amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne, avec l’éclatante écharpe des drapeaux de tous les pays, avec la gerbe d’hortensias rose et bleus qui fleurit le buste de la République, avec le clair chatoyerment des robes féminines, offre un aspect joli de fête, auquel les solennités qui s’y déroulent habituellement ne nous ont pas habitués. »
robust to the point of shapelessness and her sharply pointed nose and lips contrast with her rounded cheek and double-chin. None of these women have the sexualized, soft curves that are so often associated with either temptresses or fertile mothers. Similarly, a second illustration depicting Corbett-Ashby presents a women who looks nothing like the portrait in La Française. In this caricature, she is completely flat-chested, her hair seems as if it could be bobbed and the artist has grossly exaggerated her nose and chin.

Despite the efforts of La Française to capture a positive view of the congress, the views presented in the more widely circulated Le Matin prevailed. Georges Suarez of Le Temps frames Corbett-Ashby as a blustering, if well-meaning, “neophyte,” who falls prey to a moment of overwhelming indignation when, in the course of their interview, she mentions that in other countries women have even joined the police force. The article in the popular Le Journal is tellingly entitled “Suffragists demand the abolition of laws that protect mothers and girls.” Thus, in the coverage of this event, individual and independent women who hope for change and a chance to fully participate in society are placed in opposition to the more generic, though all important, mothers. As the conservative articles would have it, mothers and feminists are two different figures altogether. Feminists are still the monstrous, de-sexed women of L’Assiette au beurre caricatures who, as detailed in Le Journal, work against the protection of mothers, pregnant women, and young girls.

The interwar history of the Code Civil demonstrates that this negative attitude toward women who hoped to gain more independence, education, and rights only strengthened over the course of this period. Beginning with Minister of Justice René Renoult’s creation of the Commision Extra-Parlemenataire: Révision des Droits de Femmes in 1925 and culminating in the passage of Code de la Famille on July 29, 1939, increased rights for married women garnered
serious attention in French politics. Women lawyers like Yvonne Netter not only participated in Renoult’s commission but also advocated for rights and published newspaper articles and books on the subject.\(^{79}\) According to Paul Smith, “the First World War exacerbated the problems of the Code and increased the demand for some modification in a mother’s capacity to act on her children’s behalf.”\(^{80}\) Despite a prevailing conservatism during the 1920s, then, the foundation of this commission promoted a certain hope for change. In 1932 and again in 1933 when Renoult used revisions of the social code to draw attention away from women’s suffrage, optimism quickly dissipated.\(^{81}\)

The bleak image published in *La Française*, Lyonnaise artist Marcelle Botton’s black and white drawing “Ceux qui ne votent pas ne comptent pas,” captures the state of women’s political rights in the 1930s (fig. 1.22). Botton depicts a man sitting on one side of a scale while a woman stands holding a child on the other. The seated man crosses his legs and stuffs his hands into his pockets. His wide shoulders and chest fit nicely into his tailored suit and his spats stand out to the viewer. He smokes a pipe and his bearded face hints at a smug smile. Though he is slightly reclined, there is no chair back on which he can rest, instead he is seated on something that looks like gold bullion. The mother, by contrast, wears a simple dress, dark stockings, and non-descript

\(^{79}\) By the 1930s, women made up ten percent of France’s lawyers. As Paul Smith notes, in the United States at the same time only roughly two percent of lawyers were female. He also notes, “Although women were permitted to read for degrees in law, they were not admitted to all branches of the legal profession. Instead, the curious position arose by which women could become *avocats* (roughly barristers) but not *notaires*. This was an important distinction, since the latter had the exclusive right to deal with family matters, particularly relating to property and marriage settlements.” P. Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*, 169-170.

\(^{80}\) In particular, women needed legal access to the family *communauté*, or joint assets, rather than the small allowance that law decreed they could spend without their husband’s consent, so that mothers whose husbands were at the front could feed, clothe, and educate their children without making separate formal requests to a tribunal for each expense. These needs then inspired a push for much wider changes. Ibid., 171.

\(^{81}\) According to P. Smith, the minister timed the introduction of various bills pertaining to social rights “at precisely the moment” that Louis Martin attempted to introduce his much longer standing suffrage bill in the Senate. Ibid., 188.
shoes. Her hair seems to be cut into a modern bob but the lack of styling suggests that this is a utilitarian short cut rather than a fashion statement. The child she holds in her arms could be either male or female: a little doll or stuffed toy is clutched tightly in one arm but gives no further evidence as to the child’s gender. Playing with the idea of weight or “poids,” this image does emphasize the man as “de poids,” important and influential, and as someone who “fait le poids,” or measures up, to society’s standards for gaining power in a way that the woman and child cannot. At the same time, however, the French term for double standards, “deux poids,” literally, “double weight,” takes on visual form in the doubled weight of the mother and child who, despite this, seem to count less than their grown male counterpart.

Significantly, this scene—of people being weighed against one another on this sort of scale—is a familiar one from scenes of the Last Judgment: altarpieces like Rogier van der Weyden’s *The Last Judgment* (1446-52), prints like Lucas Cranach the Elder’s *Michael Weighing a Human Soul and a Devil* (1506), and sculpture like the Last Judgment scene on the portal of Notre Dame de Paris (figs. 1.23-1.25). In a heavily Catholic country, such imagery, though composed and created centuries before, would have been familiar to viewers even in the twentieth century. In the context of this image, the man sitting on his heavy gold bullion tips the scales downward, placing him closer to the depths of the underworld, while the innocent mother and her child are lifted up toward the heights of heaven. Still, even as they seem to have the spiritual advantage, the rather thick chains of the scale press in upon the heads and shoulders of the mother and child stand, creating an impression that in the material world they are trapped. Working on many levels to promote the idea that non-voting women did not have the import they deserved, feminists and feminist-sympathizers in the 1930s continued to strive for women’s
suffrage but as Renoult continued to modify his strategies and move away from attempts to gain women political rights the hope for immediate change diminished.

By the time that the Code de la famille passed into legislation in 1939, it had taken the form of a revised version of the Napoleonic Code that essentially “supported the birthrate and preserved the family in its traditional form, under the sole responsibility and under the sole authority of the father.”82 Despite its progressive roots as an attempt to loosen the severe restrictions placed on women in the nineteenth century, the law looked, according to Smith “like the Code of 1804 written in the lingua franca of the 1930s.”83 It indicated the ever more conservative trend in French politics before the war. Though the lower classes generally could not fulfill the ideal of women at home because of the need for a dual income, the French middle and upper classes felt the influence of this code and the lifestyle it mandated. The Code de la famille also dominated public discussions about the role of women in France and cemented the social parameters that would continue to prevent women from voting and exercising increased independence until after the end of World War II.

Unsurprisingly, in this climate the working women of Paris (many of them living in the outer rings of the city) were often the object of great scorn. Newspaper articles, like Charles Richet’s in Le Matin in November 1932, cast them as robbing French men of their rightful employment.84 Of course, as Sîan Reynolds has shown, the supposed exodus of women from the home was “quite illusory” and “exaggerated by public opinion.”85 Despite this, many

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82 Knibiehler and Fouquet, L'Histoire de Mères, 321.
83 P. Smith, Feminism and the Third Republic, 209.
85 Sîan Reynolds, France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics (New Jersey: Routledge Press, 2002), 107.
contemporary French sources note an overall increase in women in the workplace throughout this period. Despite counterarguments like Marguerite Thibert’s 1933 article in the *International Labor Review* countering Richet’s rhetoric, the increased visibility of women in a variety of jobs and professions seemed to prove the legitimacy of these concerns. While most employment opportunities remained closed to female workers, as early as 1906 there were, among many other working women, around 57,000 female teachers and 573 female doctors. In fact, of the 19.745 million women in France at this time, 38.9% were working in agriculture, industry, commerce, the public sector, and domestic service. The interwar period also saw an increase in the number of women working in white collar jobs. Indeed, regardless of actual statistics, public opinion maintained that “the majority [of women] work outside the home in all classes of society; the bourgeoise is a doctor, pharmacist, lawyer, pilot; in the middle and lower classes they are professors, nurses, office workers, factory workers.” Moreover, women’s rights activists during this period emphasized the presence of women in the workplace to help bolster support for their cause and to promote a view of an optimistic future. Even conservative journalist Octave Uzanne, whose book-length study *The Modern Parisienne* (1912) concluded

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86 Some sources lauded this perceived change as a significant improvement while others lamented the loss of tradition it represented. James F. McMillan and Sian Reynolds examine this phenomenon at length. See: McMillan, *France and Women*, and Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*.

87 McMillan, *France and Women*, 147-9 and Table 2, 161.

88 This was the case, despite an overall decline in the total number of women working “actively” outside the home after the First World War. Reynolds writes that a combination of “new work patterns…new technology (such as the telephone or typewriter); difficulties in recruiting qualified men…and cultural assumptions that women would be less likely to join trade unions or seek promotion…and would be content with lower wages,” all contributed to this phenomenon. Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*, 93.

that women are best-suited to be charming wives and doting mothers, had dedicated nearly half his study to women’s jobs and professions.\(^{90}\)

One attempt to inspire working women to leave their jobs and return back to the home took the form of the institution of an official Mother’s day celebration. The *Fête des mères* began small. On May 30, 1926 officials held a gathering at the town hall of Paris for the purpose of awarding honors to mothers of large families. Gold, silver, and bronze medals as well as honorable mentions were intended to inspire all women to increase their family size. Short blurbs in sources from *Le Temps* to *Le Bulletin municipal officiel de la vie de Paris* tellingly emphasize the importance of this event while giving no voice to the honorees. Though the articles in these sources are small, each gives enough coverage to show the significance of this event: the minister of labor himself took the initiative to instate a yearly celebration in honor of these mothers while around 1,000 attendees came to show support at the first iteration of the event. Male attendees are identified by both first and last name, title, and sometimes number of children, in order, it seems, to further underscore the event’s prestige. The honorees themselves are given much less importance than the men presiding over the ceremony. Lists of the prize-winners (and their addresses) graced each article published on this topic: gold medals for “Mmes Katz, 30, rue Michel-Lecomte; Brémard, 4, rue du Général-Foy…[etc.]” silver for “Mmes Clermont, 34, rue de Sambre-et-Meuse…” etc. Significantly, these women are identified only by their married names—their husband’s last names—and the articles provide just enough information to prove the existence of these women and their residence in Paris. Otherwise, their

individual identities are subsumed by their role as mother to large numbers of children, from gold medal winners who had twelve children down to the bronze medalists with eight. In this way, the published legacy of this event positions women as significant only as bearers of their husband’s children. Certainly, this gave them the power to support their nation, but it did so without allowing them full participation in society or politics.

To further counterbalance the perceived appeal of work outside the home, advertisements, particularly in the 1930s, attempted to sell the image of motherhood as much as various home and food products. Young, beautiful mothers and their adorable children, for example, smile out of posters and commercials for Phoscao and Lait Berna (figs. 1.26 and 1.27). In the Phoscao image, the mother and daughter pair are not only outside in a grassy field, but the mother has picked the girl up for a ride on her back. Their pose not only adds an element of joy and play, but also places the pair nearly cheek to cheek, their wide smiles seeming to spread from one to the other and back again. A toothpaste commercial from 1938 also uses the mother and child image to sell their product and simultaneously glamorize motherhood (fig. 1.28). The mother’s wide, bright smile reveals a row of perfectly aligned white teeth. Though her baby is not yet showing teeth, a tight embrace connects the two and suggests that the child will one day have an equally bright smile.\(^9\) In a 1939 advertisement for baby-friendly vacuum cleaners, women are urged to “protect your children!” (fig. 1.29). Smiling out at the viewer, a well-coiffed, fashionable mother stoops to guide a vacuum across the living room floor. In the foreground, a baby boy sits on the carpet she is cleaning, holding what appears to be a ball of yarn and sucking on his fingers. Just like his mother, this baby is clean and well-groomed and

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\(^9\) The fine print at the bottom of this image identifies the figures as actress Joan Blondell and her son. It notes that she appears in the 1937 comedy *The Perfect Specimen.*
looks rather content. In all of these images, then, the women and children are happily embracing life in the modern family. All are beautiful, and most smile radiantly. The children are all well-behaved; the women make motherhood seem effortless and infinitely rewarding. What is more, each of these advertisements places women outside of the workforce and into acceptable settings from the family table to the living room to an open field. These women advertise the fulfillment available to the bourgeoises of France within their own homes.

At the same time, inspired by the classical representation of mothers and children (as well as the birth of his first son), Picasso turned to this subject matter in the same year as the exhibition. In *Mother and Child* (1921) and *Maternité* (1921), for example, he creates, as Silver describes it, “images of ‘the human species,’ classicized testimonials to the fecundity of the race” (figs. 1.30 and 1.31). In both, overpowering horizontal lines, echoed in the breadth of the mothers’ bodies, create a sense of stability and endurance. The classical drapery and generic features presented enable a reading of these women and children as emblematic of the French race. Though a sense of Picasso’s avant-garde artistic style certainly remains in these paintings—the enlarged hands, simplified forms, and almost geometrical folds of the drapery owe a debt to the abstraction of modern art—they also move much more solidly into the realm of representational subject matter. Their close relationship to other images of the period further reinforces their conservative bent.

Further heightening the narrow definition of bourgeois womanhood that pronatalism and the return to order produced, large “propaganda events” like the 1921 *Exposition nationale de la maternité et de l’enfance* attempted to override progressive or feminist trends by insisting on women’s place in the home. Artwork depicting the trope of the ideal mother, lectures on topics

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like infant care, cinema screenings and theater performances, as well as large conferences all focused on and promoted narrow and often unrealistic definitions of French motherhood. Similarly, pavilions in the 1937 *Exposition International des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne* stressed the importance of women’s choice to support their nation as stay-at-home mothers. But unlike the positive and hopeful attitudes stressed at the smaller 1921 exhibition the narratives promoted in the 1937 displays and conference as well as many of the newspaper articles related to this event all emphasized a much stronger fear of the future and need for women to accept their “duty” and “protect” their nation. A closer examination of these two events and the surrounding press thus shows the move away from the cheerful representation of mothers as harbingers of a happy future and towards heightened anxieties and fears of war as Europe at the end of this period.

Held at the Jardin d’Acclimatation in the northwestern corner of the Bois de Boulogne from 15 June to 24 July, the *Exposition nationale de la maternité et de l’enfance* brought together multiple pavilions focused on a range of topics related to motherhood and infant care with lectures and other events from art exhibitions to cinema screenings to “the sensational ‘Children’s Theater’ with its 60 young and ravishing actors, its 300 costumes, large orchestra, etc., etc.”

The exposition also played host to a number of congresses, including the Le Congrès des Institutions d’Assistance et d’Hygiène sociales, which called for the foundation of schools to train nurses, early hygiene education for girls, and (state) compensation for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and mothers of large families. Ultimately, it also provided an

93 *Le Journal*, June 13, 1921, 3.

94 Dr. Georges Shreiber, “Le Congrès des Institutions d’Assistance et d’Hygiène sociales,” *La Revue philanthropique*, November 15, 1921, 447-450. (Also write-up of the “wishes” submitted by the Congrès des commissions départementales in *Journal officiel de la République française*, January 1, 1922, 115-16.) Nursing appears in this list because it was one of very few acceptable professions open to women at this time: not only had the war placed a heroic focus on women as nurses but also nursing was considered compatible with the national
opportunity for a gathering of official pronatalist organizations like the regional chapters of the Conseil supérieur de la Natalité, the Commissions départementales de la natalité, which were created in 1920 to research possible solutions to depopulation, protect and honor large families, and attempt to introduce pronatalist issues into law.\textsuperscript{95} Newspapers from \textit{Le Petit Parisien} to \textit{Le Temps} ran articles announcing this exposition and encouraging attendance.\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Le Matin} even organized a “most beautiful baby of France” competition to be held at the exposition, running articles of photos and stories of the contestants for months before the opening.

Amidst the displays at this exhibition, paintings and sculptures by a range of artists from Le Nain to Géricault, Édouard Manet, and Berthe Morisot also paid tribute to the important theme of mothers and children in art history. Though little coverage spoke specifically to this aspect of the exhibition, \textit{Le Bulletin de la vie artistique} did run a brief blurb on the fine arts contribution, “La Mère et l’enfant dans l’art.”\textsuperscript{97} Emphasizing the range of artists included in the exhibition, this article makes the importance of the theme of motherhood apparent. A reproduction of Morisot’s \textit{La Vasque}, presumably included in the displays as well as in the journal, sets a specific tone for the paintings one could expect to see (fig. 1.32). Two young girls play in and around a large basin. Their tiny facial features and rounded faces give them a rather young and certainly endearing appearance. They have chubby arms and hands that emerge from their puffy

\textsuperscript{95} In particular, the regional committees aimed to “establish statistics for population movements in their departments and to take inventory of all the extant public and private works that could assist with their efforts.” Ariège, “Exposition nationale de la natalité,” \textit{Rapports et délibérations} (1921), 462.

\textsuperscript{96} On July 24, 1922, “Les conseils pratiques” in \textit{Le Petit journal} even uses this exposition to sell “Banania,” claiming that “This product, with an exquisite taste, received the Grand Prize at the Exposition nationale de la maternité et de l’enfance.”

\textsuperscript{97} “La Mère et l’enfant dans l’art,” \textit{Le Bulletin de la vie artistique} (July 1, 1921), 372.
frock sleeves, and they are most intent on the activity set in front of them. That naïve childhood concentration and playfulness, along with their sweetly rounded forms and delicate features, paint a picture of innocence and gaiety. As a selected example of the work displayed at the *Exposition de la maternité et de l’enfance*, this work sets an idyllic tone. Visitors who saw this article, and likely the range of works on display as well, witnessed an endearing and lighthearted approach to the “joys of motherhood” and childhood innocence.

Promotional images for the exposition similarly drew on a longstanding history of mother and child representations that could be easily read by a wide-ranging audience. A commemorative coin for the *Éxposition de la maternité et de l’enfance*, for example, reproduce the composition of Raphael’s *Madonna della seggiola* (ca. 1513-14) (figs. 1.33 and 1.34). A well-known composition, included in many of Ingres’s paintings as a tribute to Raphael, this image of a young mother holding a healthy, chubby baby, resonates with the lofty hopes of a France that produced this exhibition and its paraphernalia. A promotional poster designed for the same exposition similarly draws on imagery of Mary and her son by combining images of brightly colored cartoon children waiting to enter the exhibition grounds and a grisaille image of a mother and child that recalls the Nativity (fig. 1.35). In a rondel at the upper left-hand corner of the poster, a mother, rendered in black and white and with much more detail than the waiting children beneath her, gazes down at an infant cradled in her arms. A glowing light seems to emanate from the baby, a visual reference to the Christ child, and her flowing mantel and drapery connect her to standardized images of Mary.

By the time of the 1937 exhibition, the political and social climate of France had significantly changed. Fears of the next war caused concern for the safety of women and children and, by extension, the nation as a whole. Images like “For the Disarmament of the Nations”
published in *La Française* on September 10, 1932, closely linked the vulnerability of France with the vulnerability of such figures (fig. 1.36). Abstracted by the cropping of imagery, this photomontage shows the disembodied faces of a screaming mother and bawling child positioned under a representation of a large, falling missile, all of which overlays a drawing of the globe. A large, black triangle in the middle ground points downward from bomb to mother’s face and emphasizes a sense of danger. The shape of the weapon as well as the particular silhouettes of the bomber planes in the background emphasize the sense that this is a new, contemporary threat. Indeed, even the modern photographic medium magnifies the sense of the impending danger’s modernity. Playing up the novelty of the threat increases a sense of risk by playing on fears of the unknown. As it brings the threat into contemporary terms, this image simultaneously reaches back to play on long-standing fears of a defenseless France.98

In 1937 concerns over national strength and the future of Europe came into even sharper focus as France played host to the *Exposition International des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Modère*. Though this event was intended to show a powerful, united France to the world, various economic, labor, and political setbacks contributed to a much more complicated view of France as well as the participating nations.99 Once the exposition officially opened after many delays, reviews of the event were mixed, and certain commentators, as Karen Fiss has shown, made a negative comparison between the Third Reich’s powerful display and France’s more problematic showing. Though only one strain of a rich and varied body of commentary on the fair, these sources played on “France’s own sense of insecurity and political volatility,” and a “conflicted

98 In addition, it links the mother and child with an anti-war message, touching on a popular trope of the pacifist mother who does not want to give her children to the State for cannon fodder.

national identity was manifested clearly in the rhetoric surrounding the exposition.\textsuperscript{100} Thus feelings of insecurity intensified in the context of this event.

This increased insecurity, however, did not come solely from a French lack of confidence. The aggressive showing of the German and Soviet nations certainly contributed to a sense of threat. Seeming to disregard the “the principle of international commensurability and mutual respect” that France had proposed for this event, German and Soviet displays turned the expo into what James Herbert dubs “a forum for the expression of dangerous nationalist belligerence.”\textsuperscript{101}

Their looming pavilions stood on either side of the Trocadéro gardens as if in a standoff (fig. 1.37). Cartoons like A. Dubout’s “At the Exposition: once again, these two are the ones fighting,” published in Candide July 15, 1937, captured the thinly veiled aggression this display contained (fig. 1.38). Leaning aggressively toward the German pavilion and its squawking eagle whose feathers are flying off in the frenzy of its wings, the Soviet pavilion seems to initiate the attack. The man and woman atop this tower yell out their battle cries. The woman lunges at the eagle, her nose nearly touching the bird’s beak, while the man, one hand wielding his hammer, seems to gesture with his other hand for more people to join the fray. Setting the scene for perceptions of conflict among the nations represented at this event, the showy German and Soviet pavilions also framed the view of the Eiffel Tower from the esplanade and seemed to surround this emblem of France with impending danger.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 99. Shanny Peer and James Herbert explore other themes and perceptions of the fair. Peer carefully examines the celebration of “rural life, regionalism, and folklore” that occurred alongside the celebration of modern themes during this fair’s duration. See: France on Display: Peasants, Provincials, and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World’s Fair (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). Herbert explores both the cultural and political aspects of the fair, as strongly nationalist countries came together to display their strengths to the world, as well as artistic exhibitions and contributions to the event. See: Paris 1937: Worlds on Exhibition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

\textsuperscript{101} Herbert, Paris 1937, 36-7.
In addition, because the expo occurred on French soil and because French citizens had long been wary of their eastern neighbors, comparisons between Germany and France also came to light. Compared to what the French feared was a disorderly and antiquated attempt to present their best face to the world, the costly stone pavilion of the Third Reich loomed intimidatingly large and luxurious. In addition to the powerful modern socialist aesthetic of the building, the cultural propaganda contained within the German pavilion insisted on an image of an impressively strong and unified Third Reich. Tapestries, paintings, and other mosaic and sculpture programs blended a sense of realism with allegory and symbolism and insisted on the “permanence and vigor of the German Volk…[and] guaranteed the propagation of the ‘master race.’”¹⁰² These visual programs created the impression that not only was the German population strong and large enough to overtake the French if they so desired, but also that the Germans had achieved the ideal that French had sought for so long. Thus, while a number of France’s displays, particularly those in the Pavillon de la femme, l’enfant, et la famille, used the opportunity to publicly insist on the need for more children, Germany’s pavillons emphasized an attainment of such a goal and insisted on the power of their Volk. The contrast between the two displays, in turn, served to heighten longstanding fears of a well-populated Germany “eager to finish off France.”¹⁰³

Still French self-consciousness did add to the intensity of this threat. Articles published just before and during the exposition speak to the extreme unease of French commentators surrounding their perception of France’s attempted show of strength. Writing just months before the June opening of the Exposition Internationale, Albert Dupont asks, in “Les familles françaises

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¹⁰² Fiss, Grand Illusion, 99.
¹⁰³ Roberts, Civilization without Sexes, 105.
devant le monde à l’Exposition,” “The Exhibition, to which we have invited all the Nations of the World, will it be a failure for France?...a national disaster?”104 “Families of France,” he writes, “it is you who will answer [this question].” As the whole world looks on, he explains, the French people must decide between “life and death,” by choosing whether or not to support a “prompt multiplication” of good Christian citizens. Looking away from French displays and toward the success of fascist propaganda, Suzanne Normand of Marianne wrote that “No one is talking about what the Exhibition of 1937 reserves/holds for women and children.”105 Rather, “all admiration is fiercely reserved for what has been accomplished abroad [in Italy and Germany]” while the world views France’s accomplishments with “indifference” and even “skepticism.” According to Jean-Maurice Herrmann of the socialist newspaper Le Populaire, though France had once held the honor of “showing other nations the voice of progress and civilization,” by 1937 it stood “far below most other large nations, and even a number of small [nations] like the Scandinavian states” in relation to the protection of childhood and education.106 Thus, the Exposition Internationale in general and the Pavilion of the Woman, Child, and Family in particular were not a unanimous success. Indicative of the shaky political climate of the French nation, these displays and the commentary surrounding them, in many ways, showed the ideals rather than the achievements of French society and, for some, only heightened preoccupations with low birthrates and what they perceived as national weakness.

Within the context of vulnerability and fear at the exhibition even French feminist groups rallied around a more conservative agenda concerning motherhood. Taking up the pronatalist


agenda that had swept the country with new force in recent years, French feminists organized a week-long conference on “The mother in the home: worker for human progress” to take place in the Pavillon de la Femme, l’Enfant, la Famille from June 21st to the 25th. Unlike the “great feminist meeting[s] of the exhibitions of 1889 and 1900,” this event would stress the conservative and generally anti-feminist pronatalist agenda of the time.\(^{107}\) It also provided an opportunity for conservative commentators to stress the need to move away from feminist activism and toward a more traditional division of the sexes. In two articles written specifically on this conference, conservative rhetoric and paternalistic vocabulary dominates. Looking forward to the meeting with great hope for change, Henri David of Voix des Familles expresses his concern that public opinion remains divided over the “true” place of women in society.\(^{108}\) Despite his own insistence that “work remains the great law of \textit{man},” he explains that French society has not reached an agreement on whether women should remain in and/or return to the foyer.\(^{109}\) Citing various articles from the feminist newspaper \textit{La Française}, he aims to prove that feminists have been working “to redirect mothers who want to stay home and to thwart legislative measures that could…increase their desire [to do so].” What is more, David deems the argument that women’s roles have irrevocably changed “ridiculous,” “untenable,” and “manifestations of a bad mood.” He claims to be “at once surprised and distressed” by such an “illogical and also unpleasant” view. Confident that the organizers of the feminist conference share his point of view, he concludes with the hope that the organizers of this convention will have great success in overturning such public opinion.

\(^{107}\) P. Smith, \textit{Feminism and the Third Republic}, 247.


\(^{109}\) Author’s italics.
In *Familles de France*, a response article written after the conference confirms that the high concentration of French and foreign representatives of “profamily” groups in attendance inspired the change that David hoped it would. “For twenty years,” the article reads, “the heads of large families have arduously tried to convert public opinion toward family values; now it seems that they have finally found a mass audience.” More importantly, the article suggests that this was a mass audience they could sway. The pronounced conservative rhetoric of this article engages the familiar trope of “the nature of woman and the lofty familial mission she must fulfill.” Countering feminist claims that women and men are equals, the article explains, “It is not about claiming an equality that does not exist. Woman is neither superior nor inferior to man: she is different.” In conclusion, the article places the woman’s happiness in her husband’s capable hands: “If a woman felt esteemed and understood at home with her husband,” it reads, “she would be supported and would attach herself more strenuously to her household and to her humble labor.” The easy tone that this text adopts suggests that the “natural” roles emphasized at the conference and the importance of women’s work in the home are obvious truths that had only to be announced to a large enough audience to catch on. Implied in this article is the consensus that David saw as lacking, but which scholars have insisted began forming as early as 1934.¹¹⁰ Both articles had to grapple with the “problem” of women in the workforce and the national fears of depopulation.

During this period, then, postwar conservatism greatly influenced the representation of mothers. In discussions about degeneration, feminism, and national security maternal figures

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¹¹⁰ P. Smith writes, “The Code could not have happened without a distinct shift in political and public opinion. From 1934 depopulation, for much of the previous decade a marginal political issue, became a major crisis, and demography the ‘science’ of the moment. It was from then, not only under Vichy, that women found themselves increasingly called upon to perform their patriotic duty and have children… It is the effect that is significant: tougher regulations on the employment of women by the State, the easy passage of the Pernot civil rights amendment, were signs that the backlash was underway.” See: *Feminism and the Third Republic*, 247.
became further separated from individualized identity. Though women were all supposed to aspire to become mothers, if and when they did they not only became minors in the eyes of the law but they lost their identity even as they were honored. Because public opinion of independent women, particularly feminists, was quite low during this decade, the mother came out as a figural type meant to contrast the image of the woman agitating for social rights and the vote. But to become the full opposite of the feminist, the mother had to become a silent figure, contented to be recognized only for her ability to bear and raise numerous offspring. In many ways, this was a continuation of Catholic representations of Mary as a silent vessel. The conservative and limiting representation of mothers was also, however, promoted and even expanded during this decade in texts like those commemorating the first *Fête des Mères*, events like the *Éxposition de la maternité et de l’enfance*, and images like Picasso’s *Mother and Child* and Lebasque’s peace loan poster. Advertising images also attempted to promote a glamorous and highly desirable image of maternity while journalists, politicians, and other commentators urged women to leave work outside the home to their husbands. Moving away from a focus on female suffrage, politicians attempted to rewrite the Napoleonic Code that governed married women’s rights, though ultimately the changes instated only reinforced the wife’s and mother’s dependence on her husband. At the same time, the mother took on political significance (though not necessarily weight) as she was lifted up as a solution to issues of national security and promoted as holding the key to either avoiding or winning future wars.

**Conclusion**

An image of motherhood established and promoted in the nineteenth century thus continued to influence representations of women well into the twentieth. The details of maternal
imagery certainly changed in meaning as they interacted with their specific historical context and the various hopes and fears of contemporary society. Still in many ways, representations of women as mothers insisted on certain consistent themes: from the mother in the home to the mother as savior of her nation and from motherhood as women’s patriotic duty to mothering as women’s natural role. Recurring issues, such as pronatalism and women’s suffrage, took on slightly different guises and were put forth with varying degrees of force and agency. Through it all various commentators, illustrators, and artists took great care to maintain the sanctity of the mother and, by association, a wide range of causes, ideas, and even consumer goods. Within this broader cultural context, certain projects and artworks engaged the theme of motherhood to create even more complex and varied representations and ideas. Engaging more closely with a selection of such works, the remaining three chapters of this study examine the significance of individual artistic projects in France and their contribution to a collective understanding of motherhood as cultural icon.
CHAPTER 2
Silence: Building a National Rhetoric of Maternity

Between 1910 and 1940, social and legal restrictions on women limited official recognition of their influence on the French nation. A minority of women did take on public roles as lawyers, doctors, and journalists, while some founded and led national committees and others even held non-elective political positions.¹ Some of these women even held enough influence and gained enough recognition that a small number of them were even commemorated in monuments built in the nation’s capital.² Nevertheless, especially in their roles as wives and mothers, women in France generally struggled to be seen and heard as living individuals with political and social needs. Backed by the belief that gender divisions were based in “truth” and “nature,” the laws and codes in effect between 1910 and 1940 insisted that women were inferior to men, unable to take on the responsibilities of individuality and citizenship.³ Indeed, officially married women were legally cast as their husbands’ dependents and limited to the social and political rights of a minor.

¹ Sîan Reynolds, France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics (New Jersey: Routledge Press, 2002), 156-7.

² Though few in number and, in many ways, insistent on a conservative approach to gender division, these monuments nonetheless form a part of the cityscape of Paris and assert the presence of female participants in the shaping of the nation’s history. Christel Sniter acknowledges that such statues do honor women as actors within the city, but that ultimately statues of “Great Women” do not function to propose a new image of women, equal in genius to their male counterparts. Instead, statues of women stand as incarnations of values “specific to the weaker sex:” “not creativity, visionary genius, superior spirit, rationality or inspiration, but protection, suffering, devotion, [and] sacrifice.” See Sniter, Les Femmes Célèbres, 374.

In this climate of restriction, public monuments joined with more ephemeral posters and cartoons to define French femininity in a conservative light. Intended to stand in a public place for generations, monuments needed to meet the approval of various officials and committees in charge of deeming them appropriate for widespread consumption. Between 1910 and 1940, such officials held closely to widespread pronatalist sentiments and, like so many of their compatriots, hoped to inspire women to return to bourgeois ideals. Conventional representations of women as saintly, sacrificing, and silent guardians thus prevailed during this period. Even those “great women” monumentalized in their own right, as influential individuals, were expected to conform to accepted codes of femininity. The traditional ways in which they were depicted, frequently as idealized maternal figures with an aura of purity and disinterestedness, were meant to inspire strong, romanticized devotion from viewers though they themselves were intended to remain frozen and silent. In a country where both government and big business used the trope of paternalism to legitimize their authority and success, then, the honoring of mother figures attempted to reinforce constructions of women as powerful but abstract entities that played a vital, though generally symbolic, role in the loving families of nation and business.

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4 Though she does not discuss monuments, Bonnie Smith’s study of bourgeois femininity shows that these ideals, while often framed as universal, applied to a specific class of women. See: *Ladies of the Leisure Class*.

5 I borrow the idea of monuments to “great women” from Christel Sniter who notes the rarity of such honors: of the more than 170 statues erected in Paris between 1870 and 1914, only 20 were dedicated to women. Sniter, *Les Femmes Célèbres*, 13. Even amongst these tributes, women still conformed to conservative notions of femininity. The monument to George Sand in the Jardin de Luxembourg, for example, delicately clothes the author in a lace shawl and thin dress while placing her in a lounging position that recalls a bourgeois parlor scene. Though Sand had a lively, and even transgressive, public life strolling the streets of Paris as a male *flâneur*, this monument places her squarely in a woman’s realm, within the confines of ideal bourgeois femininity.

As the supposedly universal ideal of motherhood was translated from word to image, however, complications did arise. In this chapter, the early-twentieth-century and interwar histories of two major, well-publicized Paris monuments to maternal women, *The Monument to Madame Marguerite Boucicaut and Baroness Clara de Hirsch* (1914) and *The Monument to French Mothers* (1938) exemplify the complicated and complex translation of bourgeois and national ideals into visual form (figs. 2.1 and 2.2). These projects, like the posters, cartoons, and other images explored in the previous chapter, demonstrate a French commitment to conservative ideals and certainly contribute to the restrictive social and political climate between 1910 and 1940. The calls to build set up highly abstracted and lofty representations of motherhood, and the artists attempted to remain true to their traditional intentions as they gave visual form to these images of motherhood. At the same time, after the initial proposals for these projects, subsequent texts relating to both projects attempted to reinforce the sacred image of maternal instinct and stay-at-home motherhood, both so at odds with the realities of many working mothers.

At the same time these two monuments, unlike the representations explored in chapter one, involved a complex negotiation of gender and politics that not only reveals certain

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7 Other much smaller monuments to maternity did appear in Paris during this period, but such works, like Alfred Müller’s *Maternity* (placed in 1929) and Georges Vacossin’s *Maternity* (placed in 1934), were sculptures purchased by the state and later placed on small plots of land in the city. The two monument projects that serve as the focus of this chapter were envisioned as large-scale monuments from the beginning and were not given their final forms until they had received approval and had been assigned locations. Because of this, they received much more publicity and were much more affected by (and held more power in) the thoughts and opinions of donors, committees, and the public at large.

8 In addition to their increasing political presence, women like Marguerite Boucicaut, though in many ways conforming to traditions of bourgeois femininity, worked alongside their husbands and sons and even took over leadership of family businesses in ways that drew public attention. By 1938, women were such a strong presence in society and the workforce that imagery alone in the *Monument to the French Mothers* does not seem to have been adequate to reinforce the traditional, generalized, and idealized view of motherhood that its sponsor hoped to convey.
complications and confusions of modern society, but also sheds light on the impossibility of relegating women to silent, self-sacrificing housewife and mother. As they attempted to bridge the gap between maternal ideal and contemporary viewer, both projects however inadvertently placed their female subjects at the center of a variety of national issues and events. Alongside increasing female independence and desire (or need) to work outside the home, issues of the class-based and xenophobic nature of maternal ideals also undergirded these projects. As they carefully negotiate this range of issues, then, these two monuments begin to destabilize the silent, timeless, and abstracted image of mothers promoted in so many of the works discussed in chapter one.

Honoring an Ideal: Calls to Build

Before any artist could impose a vision on either monument, the inspiration for these subjects and programs came in the form of calls to build. Setting up the parameters of each project, the calls provided a framework for their commemorative function and closely uphold an idealism of maternal perfection. For the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch, despite Boucicaut’s fame as an independent and influential modern Frenchwoman, the final, successful call brought her together with the Baroness Clara de Hirsch and cast the two women as embodiments of Goodness and Charity. Though the call for the Monument to French Mothers did not so overtly relegate its female subjects to the realm of allegory, it nevertheless emphasized motherhood as a universal ideal role and mothers as sacrificing their individuality for the silent support of lofty goals. Each monument project was thus conceptualized as a means of fitting living women into an idealized mold, a difficult process and one that necessarily entailed many
contradictions, elisions, and abstractions—complications that would remain relatively obscured until these initial calls were later translated into visual form.

Designed as a blended individualized tribute and allegorical message, the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* was first envisioned and fully funded by well-known financier Daniel Osiris. A year before his death on February 4, 1907, he drew up an extensive will that included a plethora of monument projects to be located all over continental France. Originally from Greece, he had amassed his 50,000,000 franc fortune in his work with the bank of Jules Mirès and Moses Polydore Millaud and through profitable investments in the Spanish railway. He approached his last will and testament as the opportunity to ensure that his presence in his adopted country would not fade after his death. He hoped the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* would stand in the capital city and commemorate two women with whom he shared philanthropic interests: Marguerite Boucicaut of the Bon Marché, a fellow upper-class philanthropist, and the baroness Clara de Hirsch, like him a Jew of foreign birth living in France who shared his interests in supporting the arts and sciences as well as other charitable endeavors.

For the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, Osiris left 100,000 francs to the state and specific instructions for the sculpture to be placed in a small square on the rue de Sèvres adjacent to the Bon Marché. Once the Boucicauts’ private garden, it became a public square in 1870, known as the Square de Ménages or Square du Bon Marché.

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9 The will was written in book form by someone identified only as “Gab.” Osiris was not survived by any next-of-kin and, therefore, distributed his wealth widely. Gab, *Monsieur Osiris* (Paris: Eugène Figière et Cie, 1911).

10 According to an article on the Pasteur Institute published in *Le Temps* on November 16, 1913, Osiris, Boucicaut, and de Hirsch were three of the major donors to support the expansion of the Institute’s work space. In addition, the three shared interests in hospitals for women, Jewish organizations, and perhaps other charities. As members of the Parisian elite philanthropists, it is quite possible that they also knew one another, though records of this are either absent or scarce.

11 Once opened to the public, this square became a play area for children like Simone de Beauvoir and a space for the Bon Marché band to hold summer concerts. Simone de Beauvoir, *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* (Paris:
that the individualized figures be sculpted out of white marble and that they double as personifications of Goodness and Charity. Over the next seven years, the monument would be designed, built, and placed as Osiris desired, a testament to his own legacy as well as the high public status of the two women at the center of this project.

Both women rose to positions of prominence and both seemed to have unusual education and influence for their time. Born in Brussels 1833, de Hirsch was the daughter of a Jewish banker who would rise into the aristocracy with her marriage to the baron Maurice de Hirsch. The biological mother of one son, who died in 1887 at the age of 31, she also adopted two young men who would become the barons de Forest. While many biographies focus at least in part on her maternal role, the details of her life also show that she received an education in financial and legislative affairs unusual for women at the time and, until the age of twenty-two, worked actively at her father’s firm as secretary and adviser. With her marriage to Maurice, de Hirsch rose from the upper-middle class to the aristocracy and left her position at her father’s firm. She still, however, continued to hold great influence as her husband’s advisor during his life and as director of his estate after his death. Still, it seems that she did much of her work quietly and generally used her financial acumen to accomplish the bourgeois ideal of charitable good works.

According to many sources, Boucicaut similarly received a rare financial education and worked diligently next to her husband. The narrative of her life, however, more explicitly places

Éditions Gallimard, 1958), 18. For reference to the summer concerts see Caroline M. Baker, “Madame Boucicaut and the Bon Marché,” in The Baltimore Sun April 1888, 422. On March 26, 1904, the municipal council of Paris changed the name from “square du Bon Marché” to “Square Potain.” In March of 1912, it changed a final time to “Square Boucicaut.” See “Square Potain,” in La Lancette française: Gazette des Hôpitaux, 16 April 1904, 434, and “Nouvelles Municipales: Nouveaux noms de rues,” in Le Temps 1 April 1912.

12 Gab., Monsieur Osiris, 13.

her in an unusually influential role in the business world. Born into poverty in a small village in eastern France, she did not attend school but instead worked as a washer-girl to support her mother. In young adulthood, she met the peddler Aristide Boucicaut and accepted his offer of marriage. Together, legends maintain, they strove to improve his business, and were eventually able to move to Paris, where together they received an education in finance and other important subjects.\textsuperscript{14} Like de Hirsch, Boucicaut had one son who died young, leaving her to take over the Bon Marché department store after her husband’s death.

Indeed, Boucicaut’s legacy was such that after her death and preceding Osiris’s will many other people called for a monument built in her honor. Unlike de Hirsch, who was internationally known but enjoyed only modest fame in France, native-born Boucicaut received much attention in the French press and captured the imagination of many. In December of 1887, newspapers, including the popular \textit{Le Matin} and \textit{Le Temps}, published impressive descriptions of Boucicaut’s extremely well-attended funeral. In addition, they included various portions of a letter from Arthur Meyer, the director of the newspaper \textit{Le Gaulois}, who called for a statue to her memory. In his vision, it would be a statue dedicated to “a fortune won through hard work and honesty that was generously repaid in universal good deeds.”\textsuperscript{15} Within the same few weeks, \textit{La Lanterne} and \textit{Le Gaulois} published a letter of support from women’s rights advocate Maria Deraismes, who promised she would be the first to donate funds if such a monument project were approved.\textsuperscript{16} By the end of the month, \textit{Le Temps} reported that the inhabitants of Paris’s

\textsuperscript{14} Articles like Marguerite’s obituaries in newspapers like \textit{Le Monde Illustré} and \textit{Le Temps} insist on her active role in her husband’s business. Michael Miller, however, has shown that these legends have little basis in fact and that the details of Marguerite’s life are relatively unknown. Miller, \textit{The Bon Marché}, 45.

\textsuperscript{15} “Les obèques de Mme Boucicaut,” \textit{Le Temps}, December 14, 1887, 2.

\textsuperscript{16} Maria Deraismes, “La statue de Mme Boucicaut,” \textit{Le Gaulois}, December 21, 1887, 2.
seventh arrondissement had submitted a petition for the statue to be commissioned and placed in the very same Square des Ménages.\textsuperscript{17} Within a few months of this popular, though unsuccessful, petition the idea had even gained enough publicity that the American \textit{Baltimore Sun} ran a story supporting the idea.\textsuperscript{18}

Unlike Osiris’s project, however, these early proposals were not accompanied by necessary funds and were also framed in different terms. Lacking the link to an allegorical and/or maternal figure, these projects were inspired by an individual whose life story had become a legendary tale of feminine independence and financial success “unparalleled in the history of woman.”\textsuperscript{19} According to Deraismes, Boucicaut was not only a “founder [\textit{fondatrice}] of the Bon Marché,” she also acted as an “admirable organizer” who, through her “exceptional faculties and tireless hard work” prioritized \textit{la solidarité humaine}. Moreover, with her willingness to apply experimental business methods, Boucicaut supposedly played an important role in solving “the great social problem.”\textsuperscript{20} Thus, in these accounts, she represented the very real possibility of a woman operating as an individual, an active citizen of her country.

Osiris’s successful project changed the narrative of independence that ran through these early calls to build. Not only could the lesser-known and, in some ways, more conventional de Hirsch create more of a sense of traditional bourgeois femininity, but by assigning Boucicaut and de Hirsch familiar allegorical roles, the monument toned down any radical messages the details of these women’s lives may have held. In its final form, then, the monument insisted that it was

\textsuperscript{17} “Conseil Municipal: Séance du 26 décembre 1887,” \textit{Le Temps}, December 28, 1887, 3.

\textsuperscript{18} Baker, “Madame Boucicaut and the Bon Marché,” 422.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Deraismes, “La statue de Mme Boucicaut,” 2.
Bouciaut’s and de Hirsch’s adherence to the status quo and the ideal of womanhood that made them worthy of the nation’s respect.

Like the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, the *Monument to French Mothers* mixed, from the outset, the commemoration of “real” women and the idealism of maternal perfection. This project, however, was proposed not by an individual but by a group of men who felt a public monument should be built to recognize French mothers. The initial call was framed as the project of the newspaper *Le Matin*, in a large, front-page spread written by influential journalist and art critic Lucien Klotz. Insisting on the collective nature of the project, Klotz hoped the monument would be funded by “society,” which “must at the very least pay its moral debts.” So many mothers, he felt, had sacrificed their own pleasures to raise numerous children. This monument, then, was intended as “a good work” that would particularly honor the French mothers “with modest means” who “do without and who work so that their sons can rise to their destinies as great servants of the collective.”21 Like the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, this tribute was originally intended to recognize specific deserving women, though in opening the call, Klotz says he does not yet wish to name names. Rather, he highlights a more collective appeal. “At a time when pessimism is so often justified,” he writes, “we must try to still glorify that which is great about humanity, to prevent the masses from doubting their moral worth.” In the face of depression, impending war, population decline, and immorality, a monument to motherhood, it seems, could fulfill the nation’s need for reassurance.22

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22 Others had long urged the state to bestow honors on mothers. In a book from 1923, Aurel (pseudonym for Aurélie Mortier née Faucambarge) insists that France begin celebrating mothers “as they do in New York,” with processions and even, he suggests, a ceremony to give “them” the Legion of Honor. Aurel, *Une Politique de la Maternité* (Paris: Éditions Médicales, 1923), 20-1.
As with the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, this successful call came in the wake of previous unsuccessful proposals for monuments to French mothers. But, in this case, earlier calls highlighted many of the same ideas as the final monument. According to *La Femme et l’Enfant*, the idea for such a project had been proposed as early as 1920. In July of 1934, the periodical *Revue de l’Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française* also made a call. This journal asserted that a monument to mothers of numerous children could help to solve France’s greatest problem—depopulation. As French men and women aged, the paper warned, commerce and industry would fail without the support of younger generations and France would be “incapable of protecting its frontiers against [attack].” Indeed, “the principal countries of the white race” (“*les principaux pays de race blanche*”), it claimed, were “collapsing much faster than the Roman civilization had collapsed” before them. This periodical’s bid for a monument to French mothers thus played on fears of a “dying” country that could only be saved by self-sacrificing mothers. “Would that we could someday see,” the paper declared, “in one of the most beautiful squares of Paris, a Monument to French Mothers of large families!”

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23 They attribute the earlier proposal to journalist and journal director Pierre Calel in a 1920 issue of *La Voie Sacrée*. Broadly, this journal was dedicated to remembering the sacrifices the soldiers, and their families, made during the First World War. The title, meaning “The Sacred Way,” was taken from the honorary name given to a road that was pivotal in the battle of Verdun. See “Le Monument aux Mères françaises,” *La Femme et l’Enfant* 15 November 1938, 569.


25 Ibid., 196.

26 Hoping to further encourage readers, the newspaper (erroneously) reported, that a monument to motherhood had already been designed by Hugo Lederer and placed in Berlin’s Arnswalder Platz. Misreading the motivation behind the German *Monument to Fecundity* or “Bull fountain” the author(s) of this article lament that “France did not, in this matter, precede Germany.” But they urged their fellow countrymen, to “at least imitate them!” See, “On élève un monument à la Maternité,” *Review de l’Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française*, July 1934, 216.

27 Ibid.
Staying true to the insistence on motherhood as women’s natural and even heroic role in society, Klotz’s successful proposal in *Le Matin* built on this earlier call. On December 19, 1935, the politically influential Edmond Labbé wrote another front-page article, announcing that “the nation” had, this time, responded to the newspaper’s call. He happily reported that, in addition to the support of president Albert François Lebrun, “some of the country’s finest public servants have wished to associate themselves with the newspaper’s gesture.” Moreover, in only four months the newspaper was able to “find” all the “necessary” money for the project in the form of a funding agreement from the Committee for the assistance of the liberated regions, a committee Labbé also chaired. Though, like Klotz, Labbé maintained the impression that this monument will ultimately be dedicated to individual women, he similarly emphasized that “idealism is now more necessary than ever to combat too many depressing realities.” In this way, regardless of the intention to honor women whose identities extended beyond a narrow definition of motherhood, the calls for the *Monument to French Mothers*, like Osiris’s for the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, ultimately cast its subjects as first and foremost ideal maternal beings.

The successful proposals for these two monuments, then, emphasized abstraction and allegory. They insisted that women were important to France primarily, if not exclusively, in their capacity to adhere to ideals of femininity, which included the bourgeois commitment to charity and, of course, the supposedly universal, natural role of motherhood. As mothers, these successful calls seemed to say, women could be honored by the State, but as individuals they were often overlooked or excluded. Just as a monument built to Boucicaut in her own right could not secure backing, Klotz’s first idea, to honor individual mothers, quickly morphed into a commemoration of abstracted perfection. At this point, it was important for these proposed ideals to be given form by sculptors who could articulate the sentiments inherent in the calls to build.
Aesthetic Choices: The Sculptors and the Monuments’ Forms

All members of the Académie des Beaux Arts, sculptors Paul Moreau-Vauthier, Henri Bouchard, and Alexandre Descatoire shaped the representation of motherhood in each of the monuments as their particular interests and styles determined their interpretation of the ideals they were meant to depict. As sculptors associated with the traditional French academy, all would have understood the desire to commemorate conservative ideals. At the same time, however, their monuments suggest that they were also aware of the need to engage modern viewers. Attempting to bring the themes and sense of timeless universality inherent in the calls to build to a modern audience, they made choices that allowed their female subjects to operate on two levels: as living women and as ideals of bourgeois femininity and maternal sacrifice. In the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch, the two central figures are not only allegories of goodness and charity but also recognizable portraits of Boucicaut and de Hirsch. In the Monument to the Mothers, the central grouping of a mother and her children, which is based on earlier portraits of Bouchard’s own family, connects to contemporary audiences through details of style and dress, while emphasizing the abstracted ideal of silent, stay-at-home mother. At the same time, the figures grouped on either side of the main structure of this monument embody varying roles, including the nurse, that French women could fill outside of motherhood. A closer look at the sculptors and their oeuvres as well as an examination of the monuments’ forms reveals the ways in which the female figures of both monuments became a mix of modernity and tradition as the artists negotiated contemporary realities and traditional ideals.

A graduate of the École des Beaux-Arts and a recipient of the Grand Prix de Rome in 1896, the sculptor for the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch Paul Moreau-Vauthier
developed an oeuvre that frequently rooted his subjects in a contemporary context by not only carefully capturing but indeed emphasizing fashion. Perhaps most famously, his colossal representation of the City of Paris, *la Parisienne*, used details of contemporary fashion to cast Paris in the guise of a fashionable modern woman (fig. 2.3). Using the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt as his model for this allegorical figure, Moreau-Vauthier consulted well-known couturier Jean Paquin to design clothing worthy of this modern effigy. The sculpture stands tall and proud, her body tilted and chest held high as if she were the figurehead on a ship. Her fur-trimmed coat opens to reveal a corseted body with a flowing dress. The ship, a symbol of Paris, that crowns her head looks like a modernized hat or headdress. Crowning the progressive program of the famous monumental gateway at the Porte Binet during the Exposition Universelle of 1900, *La Parisienne* was seen by contemporary critics not as “a timeless goddess or clearly allegorical figure,” but as “the triumph of modern decoration.” Indeed, as Karen Offen explains, *La Parisienne* “symbolized to the world the importance of well-bred, fashionably ‘feminine’ French women and their cultural influence under the Republic.”

After this widely discussed project, Moreau-Vauthier’s work became a touchstone for many discussions of modernity. As he went on to sculpt portraits for many wealthy

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29 Offen also argues that “*La Parisienne* effectively asserted her elegance, seemingly in deliberate defiance of the cigar-smoking caricature of the *femme nouvelle* promoted by satirical journals and antifeminist writers during the later 1890s. *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 272.

30 Even as late as 1933, Jean de Vignes Rouges continues to insist on Moreau-Vauthier’s originality. “[He] has estimated that there is more merit in trying to do ‘something new’ with the image of the men and women of today than to indefinitely reproduce the contorted and allegorized nudes to which sculpture has been devoted for so many centuries.” Jean des Vignes Rouges, “Paul Moreau-Vauthier, Sculpteur,” *L’Art et les artistes*, March 1933, 343.
patronesses, he continued to emphasize such a modern twist, paying careful attention to defining
details of their faces as well as their style of dress. By the time that he won the commission for
the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch, Moreau-Vauthier had made a name for himself as a
“sculptor of modernity,” which was reflected in his design for this work.\textsuperscript{31}

His approach to the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch, in many ways, kept with this
larger trend of emphasizing modernity, portraiture, and fashion in his work. Chosen from a large
number of entries submitted to an all-male selection committee, Paul Moreau-Vauthier’s vision
for the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch “seduced” judges and the wider public alike with
its “emotional” yet “tactful” design.\textsuperscript{32} At the top of a marble staircase, the aristocratic baroness
de Hirsch is positioned meaningfully one step above the bourgeoise Boucicaut, the two women
gazing intently at a small boy, who respectfully clutches his hat in one hand as he eagerly
engages with Boucicaut (fig. 2.4). A young mother to the group’s right, clutching a small infant
in her arms, is dressed in thin layers of clothing that stand in contrast to Boucicaut’s and de
Hirsch’s thick winter coats and warm accessories (fig. 2.5). She ensures that the viewers
understand the nature of the child’s exchange with these women and brings the theme of
motherhood into this commemorative representation. Stooping down to listen with her hand
gently touching the boy’s shoulder, Boucicaut quietly assumes a pose that conveys her role as the


\textsuperscript{32} Le Temps, December 9, 1911. More than fifty artists sent sketches to a newly formed, all-male selection
committee, which included the Prefect of the Seine and four members of the Académie des Beaux Arts. (Bulletin
municipal official de la ville de Paris (20 July 1911), 3069. These original designs were publicly displayed in
December of 1911, at the local council building in the seventh arrondissement. (See Le Temps, “Le monument
Boucicaut-de Hirsch,” December 9, 1911, 4.) From them, the committee selected three artists to make half-scale
models and, on June 28, 1912, ultimately awarded the project to Paul Moreau-Vauthier. (For the announcement of
his selection see, for example: Gil Blas June 29, 1912.)
personification of Goodness. The baroness, also bending to listen, clutches her purse at the ready in her left hand and so personifies Charity.

Despite Osiris’s insistence on the function of these women as allegory, Moreau-Vauthier, on his quest to “destroy outdated customs and establish the aesthetic of the future,” carefully captured defining physical features and modern fashions that highlight their significance as individuals.33 “Obviously,” he later told journalist Jean des Vignes Rouges, “[Osiris] wanted Mme Boucicaut and Mme de Hirsch to be represented realistically and not as allegories.”34 Regardless of Osiris’s intent, in the final monument the women stand out as individuals far more than allegories. De Hirsch’s small, thin features, short bangs, and signature hat as well as Boucicaut’s wide, rounded features and face and signature hairstyle readily identify each (figs. 2.6 and 2.7).

Indeed in a comparison of the figures in the monument with images of Boucicaut and de Hirsch, Moreau-Vauthier’s dedication to realism becomes clear. In a well-known photograph of Marguerite Boucicaut she stands in what appears to be a drawing room, her left elbow resting on a side-table and her hand holding a fan (fig. 2.8). Her hair is piled high on her head in a large braid and her rounded face and solid frame give her a powerful presence. In Moreau-Vauthier’s sculpture, he has not only made reference to this distinctive hairstyle, but he has captured her broad frame and face. Detailed facial features from her strong brow, set lips, and distinctive nose and chin further emphasize that this is indeed a portrait of the woman of the Bon Marché. A photograph of Clara de Hirsch similarly shows the artist’s attention to capturing distinctive details of each woman (fig. 2.9). In this image de Hirsch wears a distinctive, layered hat with a


veil that drapes down behind her and a high-collared dress with a tailored jacket. Her short bangs curl against her forehead and her deep-set eyes, thin lips, and distinctive nose stand out to the viewer. In the sculpture, Vauthier has captured all of these details of face and dress, allowing her fur coat to fall off one shoulder and reveal the same dress and jacket underneath. Because of this interpretation, instead of strictly fictional, the figures of Boucicaut and de Hirsch stand out less as allegories than as individuals who embody the same ideals as the allegorical figures of Goodness and Charity.

Moreover, Moreau-Vauthier’s choice to dress them in modest, professional winter coats, adopted from masculine fashion, at once shows their role out in society (rather than in the home) and suggests a link to modern viewers as they resonate with 1914 styles. Their simple but warm winter coats place Boucicaut and de Hirsch firmly outside on the streets of Paris, suggesting their active role in public life. The straight lines and added bulk that such coats provided also give Boucicaut and de Hirsch a more powerful, commanding silhouette than dresses that cling to their corseted bodies. They also connect the two women to a twentieth-century audience that would have still considered the fur necklines and long, draping coats fashionable (fig. 2.10). Despite such visual similarities, however, fashion during Boucicaut’s and de Hirsch’s lifetime had unique significance to upper-class French citizens. Beginning in the late-nineteenth century, as bourgeois women gained more recognition in public life through the sanctioned outlet of charitable work, clothing became an obvious symbol of their adherence to accepted codes of conduct. Indeed, commentators of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century

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35 A longer discussion of their fashion can be found below in the section on the sculptor Paul Moreau-Vauthier’s aesthetic choices for the monument.

36 Famous fashion designer Paul Poiret, whose work is pictured in fig. 2.10, continued to produce outerwear that resembled the fashions captured in the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch.
expected to be able to easily and immediately interpret a woman’s character by her clothing.\textsuperscript{37} According to Bonnie Smith, this often took the form of understated, dark silks, hair swept neatly back from the face and a certain fashion of jewelry meant to convey “simple elegance.”\textsuperscript{38} Stores like the Boucicauts’ Bon Marché capitalized on as well as manufactured the importance of clothing and accessories in defining a woman’s character and conveying her identity.\textsuperscript{39}

At the same time, however, there was a duality to women’s clothing that mirrored their complicated social and cultural identities in nineteenth-century France, something Susan Hiner calls a “paradoxical doubleness.”\textsuperscript{40} Handbags, for example, like the one clutched tightly by de Hirsch, could be “decorative objects of desire,” and simultaneously “the vehicle and emblem of a new female autonomy that looks ahead to economic independence from patriarchal structures.”\textsuperscript{41}

The specific and readily identifiable fashion of “street clothes” like those worn by Boucicaut and de Hirsch also presented something of a duality. Drawing heavily on the sensible and discreet

\footnotesize{37} Clothing was thought to be a sort of performance and even an art form as women attempted to display their social status and also shape public interpretations of their identity through fashion. For an example of contemporary commentary on the subject of fashion and its uses see Uzanne, \textit{The Modern Parisienne}, 167-70. For an evaluation of the ways in which “la mode” showed an “obedience to the female code” see B. Smith, \textit{Ladies of the Leisure Class}, 70-71. For the performativity of fashion see Cristina Giorcelli, “Fashioning a Century: Introduction,” in \textit{Fashioning the Nineteenth Century: Habits of Being}, edited by Cristina Giorcelli and Paula Rabinowitz, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 2. Finally, for the concept of “aesthetic selfhood” and the emphasis on fashion as art, see Lisa Tiersten, \textit{Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France} (Berkley: University of Californian Press, 2001), especially chapter 4, “Marketplace Modernism: Reinventing the Chic Parisienne.” It is also interesting to note here that Alain Corbin has shown this craze of fashion (particularly as it is linked to a desire for individuality), for the most part, was an urban phenomenon: “full-length mirrors were all but unknown in the countryside, where peasants still discovered their physical identities through the eyes of others and relied on intuition to control their facial expression.” Alain Corbin, “The Secret of the Individual,” \textit{A History of Private Life}, vol. IV (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 460.

\footnotesize{38} B. Smith, \textit{Ladies of the Leisure Class}, 70.

\footnotesize{39} Miller, \textit{The Bon Marché}, 180-1.

\footnotesize{40} Susan Hiner, \textit{Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth-Century France} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 179.

\footnotesize{41} Ibid.
styles of professional menswear, these coats enabled women to maintain an air of modesty and distance from the possible corruption of street culture but at the same time often gave women the appearance of broad shoulders, strong arms, and bulky silhouettes generally associated with powerful male figures (figs. 2.11 and 2.12). In the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch, this duality of fashion plays with the line between allegorical ideals of bourgeois femininity and modern independence and agency.

Attentive to details of fashion that would help relate these two women to modern audiences, and careful to maintain their individuality by carefully capturing their likenesses, Moreau-Vauthier produced a monument that did not relegate Boucicaut or de Hirsch to the realm of allegory. Instead, he created strong, individualized figures that not only seem comfortable out in public, but have the agency and power to help others in need. These women loom over viewers, ready also to help, or perhaps dominate, them as well. Thus, though Osiris intended for these women to be the epitome of bourgeois femininity as personifications of Goodness and Charity, Moreau-Vauthier’s winning design cast these two figures with their distinct features and commanding fashion as influential individuals.

Working three decades after Moreau-Vauthier in a France gripped by the fear of continued population decline and another war, the artists chosen to complete the Monument to French Mothers took inspiration from the highly conservative interwar atmosphere and adopted a more traditional approach to their subjects. Where Moreau-Vauthier stressed the independence of his two female subjects, Henri Bouchard and Alexandre Descatoire worked to heighten, rather than diminish, the importance of these women’s contributions to society.

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than downplay, the timelessness and universality of their figures. Even within this monument, however, details show the complications of relegating women to the realm of allegory and ideals.

On March 29, 1936, *Le Matin* announced that the Comité d’Assistance des régions libérées (Assistance Committee for the Liberated Regions) had chosen two “eminent personalities” to execute the project: Academy president Bouchard and his colleague Descatoire. Both men had been recipients of the Prix de Rome and both had attained the rank of Officers of the Legion of Honor. They had also most recently designed various projects for the 1937 International Exposition of Art and Technology, including the renovated façade of the Palais de Chaillot.  

Though much less interested in capturing the details of haute-couture fashion than Moreau-Vauthier, these artists were still influenced by the aesthetics of their time. Recipient of the Prix de Rome in 1901 and professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Bouchard lauded the grand traditions of sculpture and hoped his work would “attain the grandeur of the statues of antiquity.” According to critic Jean Claude, Bouchard attempted to move away from “useless details” and toward a “robust simplicity” that would place him “on the highest rung of contemporary sculptors.” Still, as he worked toward such lofty goals, he increasingly

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43 Association des amis d’Henri Bouchard, *Bouchard, l’atelier du sculpteur: à la découverte du Musée Bouchard* (Paris: Association des amis d’Henri Bouchard, 1995), 30. To work with these two sculptors, the committee selected architect Paul Bigot, an architect whose approach to his work complemented Bouchard’s and Descatoire’s and aimed for many of the same artistic goals. Also a recipient of the Prix de Rome in 1900 and a professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Bigot was known for building monuments to “the most powerful and noble ideas” that were “dignified in their power and their nobility by the simple beauty of line and proportions.” While he filled his projects with scientific and mathematical achievements like Descatoire, the elegant simplicity for which his work was known connects him to Bouchard. For more on this architect, see: Paul Moreau-Vauthier, “L’Art Monumental de Paul Bigot,” *L’art et les artistes: revue mensuelle d’art ancien et moderne* 131 (November 1932): 58.


abandoned highly complex imagery and, like many avant-garde artists, instead emphasized simple forms and designs. Similarly bound to ideals of artistic tradition, Descatoire trained at the École des Beaux-Arts, competed for the Prix de Rome of 1902, and ultimately joined the faculty at the academy alongside Bouchard. According to critics, he was “not a revolutionary” but always emphasized the “longest traditions” of art in his work, and, unlike Bouchard, captured a “rare anatomical science” and close attention to detail in his work. Though such close attention to detail distanced him from avant-garde artists, it did heighten a sense of realism and immediacy in his figures that helped viewers to relate to them as potential individuals in modern culture. Both men thus produced work that maintained a dialogue with modern society, despite never displaying their work in any of the more progressive venues like the Salon d’Automne. Coming together to work on the project for the Monument to French Mothers, these men chose to emphasize an imposing aesthetic that blended traditional ideals with an attention to detail and simplicity that helped this work relate to modern viewers.

Intended to be visible from a great distance, the central edifice of the Monument to French Mothers is composed of a curved wall with three levels. At the center, in high relief against a textured background, stands a young, slender mother who, at around one and a half times larger than life, forms the pinnacle of a triangular composition of figures (fig. 2.13). In an exaggerated image of adoration and even supplication, three children of varying ages turn to a central mother figure. To her left, an older boy kneels, clasping the mother’s right hand to his heart, an open book next to him showing that he has momentarily put down his worldly studies.


and turned his attention to the honoring of this maternal figure. To her right, a girl—who, we can safely assume, will one day become a mother herself—gazes adoringly at the mother while clasping her hands to her heart. In her arms, the mother holds an infant who tenderly kisses her cheek—an intimate pose that recalls the long iconographic tradition of Virgin and Child. On either side of this group, as the arc curves out toward the viewer, varying generations of larger-than-life mother figures stand and sit on thick stone steps, embracing children of many ages (figs. 2.14 and 2.15). Flanking this central edifice, stand two groups of figural “types” (figs. 2.16 and 2.17). Coming together to pay homage to the mothers and, in so doing, setting the mood for this commemorative space, these figures all bow their heads in solemn reverence.

Inaugurated during the twentieth anniversary year of the end of the First World War, this monument also evokes thoughts of allegorical France and various idealized mother figures seen in war memorials built during the interwar period. During the interwar period, as sculptural commemoration “came to dominate the civic landscape” in France, the monuments dedicated to France’s fallen soldiers shaped the image of women in twentieth-century French monuments. Though they varied in structure and design, all over the country monuments to World War I used maternal figures to instruct viewers on the values represented and to model ideal honoring behavior for viewers. At the same time, the maternal figures on these monuments were frequently conflated with or doubled as allegory. The visual similarities between the maternal figures placed on such monuments and those in the *Monument to French Mothers* suggest that

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48 Even the names of the two types of monuments “Monument aux Mères” and “Monument aux Morts” resonate with one another.

49 Nearly all of France’s 36,000 communes saw the construction of such monuments during the interwar period between the end of the war and the mid-1920s. Sherman, *Construction of Memory*, 9-10.

50 Ibid., 210.
Bouchard and Descatoires were strongly influenced by such previous works. A monument in Equeurdreville-Hainneville, for example, captures a mourning mother and two children who look surprisingly similar to the figures flanking either side of the Monument to the Mothers, while the relief sculpture on a monument in Nîmes shares striking similarities to the form of the Monument to the Mothers (figs. 2.18 and 2.19). In both, mother figures embody civilian grief and demonstrate appropriate behaviors for living French citizens. In other memorials, like the 1925 monument aux morts in Bapaume by sculptor M. Hoeuw female allegory and maternal figure were conflated as the female figure who takes on the maternal role of showing the young boy how to honor the dead is dressed in antiquated clothing (fig. 2.20).

Between 1936 and 1938, a renewed interest in commemoration of the war, however disparate, brought such figures and ideas back to the forefront of collective consciousness. In the Monument to French Mothers, the central figure’s lowered eyes and strong, lean body as well as the young man kneeling and adopting what appears to be an act of allegiance echo the visual vocabulary used to express the mutual love and respect between France and her young men. As in the Nîmes monument, the central figures emerge from a large edifice and, though there is no central portal, they are framed by an architectural structure. As in the monument in Equeurdreville-Hainneville, separate groupings of mothers and children gather off to the sides and groups of figures stand free of the large wall on either side, showing viewers proper ways to engage with the central scene. Through these and other connections to the numerous war memorials built all over France, the figures in the Monument to French Mothers play on a

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51 I take the idea of commemoration as influencing and even establishing a certain collective consciousness from Sherman’s discussion of the function of commemorative representation in Ibid., 312-16.

52 Roberts describes some of these visual trends in Civilization without Sexes, 90.
contemporary awareness of patriotism as related to war and position the mother as figure who not only embodies traditional interpretations of motherhood but also allegories of France.

At the same time, however, the figures of the *Monument to French Mothers* also speak to the modern role of women as living and active members of the French collective. Modeled with the slim, straight silhouette and small breasts that defined the mother’s supposed opposite, the New Woman, the central figure of the monument connects to the aesthetics of modern fashion. At the same time that she is a mother, she is youthful, her body, stance, face and hair linking her to Descatoire’s *La Jeunesse*, which was commissioned to stand outside the Palais de Chaillot during the recent 1937 World’s Fair (fig. 2.21). What is more, this central grouping of figures evolved, it seems, from earlier sculptures of Bouchard’s wife and children. A wooden *Maternité* from 1919, for example, isolates the mother figure from a much larger sculpture group of *Madame Bouchard et ses deux enfants* (fig. 2.22). Similar to the mother in *Monument to French Mothers*, this figure holds a baby in her left arm and bends her head down to receive a kiss from her child. Her dress is simple and reveals small breasts and a straight frame, just as in the later monument. In 1923, when the family welcomed a third child, Bouchard remade the earlier work with his wife and children, this time *Madame Bouchard et ses trois enfants* (fig. 2.23). Again, the mother leans down toward the child in her left arm, though in this iteration the child is curled against her rather than offering a kiss. Two children also flank her sides: to the left, where the mother seems to look, a young child in what appears to be ancient Greek clothing, to her right a young child who holds on to her right hand. As in the *Monument to the Mothers* both children lean in toward the mother and frame her, the one to her right clasping her hand. Though in the later representation the two young children would become young adults clearly entrenched in gendered norms, the foundation for the composition is apparent in the earlier work. Certainly, in
these two earlier images, Bouchard attempts to assert a certain timelessness in the image of his family. Giving them simple, even antiquated clothing and somewhat generic features, he insists that they take on the role of an “every family.” Still, they are also his wife and children, living in contemporary times and participating in modern society. In the final monument, as he adds two older children and dresses them in modern fashion, the connection to contemporary France is solidified.

In addition, Decatoire’s figures underscore a connection to modern life and further bring women out of the strict role of allegory. Prominent among the figures flanking the central scenes, of course, are female types that play various roles in French society, some of them professional. Though they are relegated to more traditionally acceptable, care-giving occupations and positions such as nurse, farmer, and bourgeoise, they still depict women’s influence outside the realm of motherhood. Unlike his idealized allegory of youth, La Jeunesse, Decatoire’s figures for the Monument to French Mothers are given more individualized features and, therefore, have an air of lived reality. Though they are still types capable of appealing to a highly conservative audience and though they are outnumbered by the men, female figures stand on equal footing with male figures to form a cross-section of French society: the nurse and the bourgeoise stand beside the male artist, aristocrat, soldier, baker, and stone mason, while a female farmer stands with a male farmer, a scholar, an artist, a factory-worker, and a miner. Certainly, each of these female types is in some way connected to an ideal of care: the nurse tends to the sick, the bourgeoise tends to the poor, the female farmer tends the earth (fig. 2.24). Importantly, these women have been included in the monument without being represented as mothers. If nothing else, they nod to the importance of women in society beyond motherhood and stand as a testament to the impossibility in the 1930s of relegating women solely to a maternal role.
In each of these monuments, the sculptors thus shaped the representation of women around both traditional and modern themes and roles. Moreau-Vauthier’s attention to face and fashion heightened the sense that Boucicaut and de Hirsch were not allegories but living women whose actions may have embodied aspects of the bourgeois feminine ideal, but who also played a role in society in their own right. Bouchard’s and Descatoire’s figures, though much more conservative and generic than Moreau-Vauthier’s, also blended tradition and modernity and further underscore the impossibility of relegating women to an ideal. Bouchard not only modeled the central mother figure on his own wife and children, but also treated them with a simplified stylistic approach and created a youthful figure whose slim silhouette fit well with modern aesthetics. Descatoire placed female and male figures side-by-side and gave his non-maternal female types a lifelike sense that emphasized to viewers their place in society.

The aesthetic choices that sculptors Moreau-Vauthier, Bouchard, and Descatoire made moved beyond the allegorical and symbolic proposals put forth by Osiris, Klotz, and Labbé. As they translated the highly abstracted and idealistic intentions of these calls to build, the sculptors faced a difficult and complex task. The representations of women in their monuments ultimately combined portraiture and ideal, modernity and tradition to create works that would speak to contemporary audiences at the same time that they emphasized a certain utopian vision of gender division. Though motherhood played a prominent role in both monuments, the sculptors also promoted a sense that women could and did participate in French society in other capacities as well—as benefactresses, nurses, and farmers.
Social Harmony: Location and Class

As the projects moved from the abstractions of the successful calls to build to the more concrete visual form given to them by their sculptors, the women of the monuments moved away from the realm of allegory and ideal and into a more complicated reality of motherhood in twentieth-century France. The placement of these monuments in public locations in two very different neighborhoods in Paris further complicated the universalizing idea of the French mother. Outside the isolating walls of a museum or gallery space, these monuments necessarily participated in the physical, social, and cultural landscape of their locales. For the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch this meant the wealthy seventh arrondissement, directly outside the grand Bon Marché storefront. There, the monument participated in the daily life of many other upper class French women who would also have felt compelled to take on the role of benefactress. It also paid homage to the prosperity of its neighborhood in a way that would have assured its wealthy visitors of the important social function held by affluent women. The Monument to French Mothers, on the other hand, stood in an isolated garden on the outskirts of the predominantly working-class thirteenth arrondissement. In this area, many mothers could not have stayed at home with their children even if they so desired because of their need to contribute to the family income. At the same time, because it was built during major renovations to a heretofore neglected area, the Monument to French Mothers became part of a program of the hope of social harmony and national renewal. Interpretations of both monuments were thus dependent on the context in which they were seen and by whom and this, in turn, further contributed to the breakdown of universalizing ideals of motherhood.

By situating the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch within a context of wealth and luxury, the Square Boucicaut introduced a marked class element to the ideal of motherhood. At
the border between the sixth and seventh arrondissements, this small garden provided the monument a backdrop of wealth and morality that would have easily upheld the ideals of bourgeois femininity so prominent in its program. Its placement in the Square Boucicaut, a park adjacent to the most elaborate entrance to the Boucicauts’ Bon Marché department store, further reinforced associations between the monument and opulence as well as idealized bourgeois culture. As Michael Miller has shown, the Bon Marché “gave shape and definition to the very meaning of the concept of a bourgeois way of life…the proper household, the correct attire, the bourgeois good life were all, to a degree, Bon Marché creations.” By acting as a sort of “cultural primer,” this store brought the values and lifestyle of the upper classes to middle-class society and, as a result, helped to create and define a new French culture. It also played into the neighborhood’s emphasis on charity and good works by promoting the ideal of bourgeois femininity and duty to the city’s poor.

At the heart of bourgeois culture (as well as the Bon Marché’s commercial program) stood the goal of maternal perfection. Indeed, the institution of the family acted for many as the “ultimate arbiter of success or failure” and the center of French ideals and morality. As modeled in the monument by Boucicaut and de Hirsch the upperclass women of French society

\[53\] In Miller’s words this was a neighborhood known for “its affluence, its Catholic orders, and its bienpensant ways.” The Bon Marché, 178.

\[54\] Ibid., 182.

\[55\] Ibid., 183.

\[56\] Ibid., 75 and 86. Michelle Perrot explains the importance of the family in French culture, writing that “The family reigned triumphant in the doctrine and rhetoric of all parties from conservative to liberal and even libertarian, which celebrated it as the basic cell of the organic social order.” Of course individuals also rebelled against the discipline of family hierarchies and increased state intervention threatened the autonomy of the family. Perrot, “Introduction to The Family Triumphant,” in A History of Private Life: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War, ed. Michelle Perrot, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, vol. IV (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 97, and 99-167. Bonnie Smith also discusses the importance of family life in bourgeois culture in Ladies of the Leisure Class.
expanded their expected role of loving, sacrificing mothers outside the boundaries of the family home by taking on the duty of supporting those in need. As Bonnie Smith has shown, they subscribed to a notion of *caritas* that translated the concept of family ties to a larger spiritual equivalent that made them responsible for the needy of the nation.\(^{57}\) According to this line of thinking, “not only were the rich bound to one another by actual or symbolic ties of blood, but the poor as well had a familial connection to one another *and the rich.*”\(^{58}\) Distinguishing themselves from their husbands and other male counterparts, the bourgeois women of France almost exclusively concerned themselves with other women and their children, keeping their focus primarily on familial issues.\(^{59}\) Furthermore, women often made a show of personal investment in their acts of charity. Rather than going through a potentially “impersonal, blind, and hard” benevolent society or institution, many wealthy women personally undertook acts of charity in public.\(^{60}\) In this way, the bourgeoise earned the reputation as “the link between the higher classes and the lower,” as “more progressive than the aristocracy, wiser than the tradespeople.”\(^{61}\)

Situated between the impoverished boy and the aristocratic de Hirsch, Boucicaut stands as a symbol of these ideals, reinforcing the cultural attitudes held in the seventh arrondissement and put forth in part by the store that stands across the street. She is the personification of Goodness and the visible link between the boy and the woman who is preparing to give him a

\(^{57}\) B. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class*, 128.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 134. My emphasis.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 138.

\(^{60}\) An early twentieth-century text on the women of Paris makes this distinction between types of charity. See: Uzanne, *The Modern Parisienne*, 218.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 167.
charitable donation. They both appear in this scene as individuals and are not hiding behind an institution or relying on an organized charity to care for the less-fortunate citizens of Paris. They are pictured with a mother and her children, which does keep their charitable act within the confines of female *caritas*. The simple elegance of their winter wear underscores their adherence to social code. The crowds of wealthy women who would have frequented the adjacent department store as well as the park, could easily have taken inspiration from these figures. Invited into the scene by the grand staircase, female viewers could have connected both to the traditional ideals and independent attitudes that the figures of Boucicaut and de Hirsch embody. Much as department store culture was a public institution identified as a “safe” space for upper-class women to participate in public life, so too French parks, particularly after Haussmannization, allowed women a space in which to lay “equal claim as men” to the modern urban public sphere. Through the charity and goodness on display, this monument would help to inspire viewers toward a more dedicated citizenship in which they took on the responsibility of distributing a portion of their wealth to those in need.

Such a notion of French motherhood specifically targets a wealthy viewer. The ideal of maternal perfection presented by this monument and in this context can only be achieved by those with means. The nursing mother in the monument, dressed in rags, can do her best, but needs the grace and support of the honored patronesses behind and above her to actually care for

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62 Despite this visual adherence to bourgeois values, Boucicaut in life undertook the types of charity that Smith identifies as solely masculine. “Unlike their husbands,” she writes, “they [bourgeois women] never sponsored the construction of working-class housing...or the arrangement of financial programs such as retirement, insurance, or accident plans” (B. Smith, 138). But Boucicaut famously took part in such plans when she took over control of the Bon Marché after her husband Aristide’s death.

her children. In this way, the monument moves away from universalizing ideals as it restricts certain classes from achieving the principles of maternal achievement honored in its program.

Addressing a much different audience in a neighborhood far from the center of Paris, the Monument to French Mothers more specifically addresses mothers of “modest means” and thus draws out the contradictions and elisions inherent in an ideal of French motherhood. Rather than the wealthy sixth and seventh arrondissements, the monument was built at the edge of the thirteenth. On the outskirts of the city, this was an area “made exotic in literature, film, song, and art” and perceived as inhabited by “a marginal people exiled from Paris proper.”

Yet, as a space slated for urban renewal, it was also an area that became a veritable “obsession” for those seeking a moral and social regeneration for France. Because of this, the Monument to French Mothers, though quite distant from the more prominent and wealthy neighborhoods of Paris, took on great significance in terms of France’s hope for regeneration and a brighter future. Like the redevelopment projects underway in the thirteenth, the monument presented ideas of population increases, moral regeneration, and national security in the face of future war. It also interacted with a context of racial and social tensions and a hope for the transformation of these issues through a new urban plan intended to promote a utopian way of life.

Unlike the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch, the Monument to French Mothers did not have a ready location. Instead, the men working on the project had to request a site from the municipal Director of Architecture and Promenades. Though the monument had gained widespread approval from people as influential as President Lebrun, the large space that it would

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64 Patricia Morton examines these outskirts of Paris as she investigates the 1931 Colonial Exposition, which took place in the neighboring twelfth arrondissement. She calls the site a “taxonomy of marginality.” See Patricia Morton, Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 130.

occupy (thirty-eight meters long, twelve meters wide, and five to six meters high) created some difficulty in placing it within the confines of Paris proper. Indeed Klotz emphasized to *Le Matin*’s readers on November 1, 1936 that this monument could not be placed just anywhere: not only was it intended to cover 3,000 square meters but it was believed it would play host to numerous official ceremonies and large crowds.

With this in mind, the committee in charge of the project made a request for an area that, they believed, would fit these needs well: a much coveted position at the porte de la Muette. Seemingly surprised by their audacity, the Director replied that there was “no question” of such placement. That space, he reminded the committee, had already been denied to much more prominent projects, including monuments to Albert I of Belgium and Alexander I of Yugoslavia. As an alternative, for a “monument of this genre,” he proposed an area under development on the outskirts of the thirteenth arrondissement at the intersection of rue Keufer and boulevard Kellermann. There, the monument would be placed abutting a “planned” park at a site that was, at the time of the Service Director’s response, in the throes of major construction to demolish old fortifications that occupied the area. Not only would the newly opened spaces of

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67 This location is in the sixteenth arrondissement. Though it is also on the periphery of Paris, it is a much more popular area—had the monument been placed here, it would have been less than a mile from the Palais de Chaillot and only a mile and a half from the Arc de Triomphe.

68 It is, of course, worth noting here that the “more notable” projects he cites were dedicated to men. What is more, as if trying to find every logistical reason why the monument could not be placed at this location, the director even added that such a large monument would “completely block the view of the lake and of Mont Valérien.” AP, V.M92 7: Service Director, letter to the Prefecture of the Seine, July 8, 1936.

69 “I cannot,” he writes, “attach a photograph of the location, a work site for the demolition of the fortifications occupying this area: photography would not be informative.” Archives de Paris, Box V.M92 7 (1884-1941): Préfecture de la Seine, H.B. Service Technique d’Architecture, Division des Promenades et Expositions, Rapport de l’Architect Divisionnaire, July 8, 1936.
this area allow for the large processions that the committee imagined would take place each
Mothers’ Day, but it would also, in such close proximity to neighborhoods and parks, place this
monument in view of an appropriate audience of women and children. At the same time, the
obscurity of the site, on the very periphery of Paris in a marginal, working class neighborhood,
intrinsically limited the viewership of the monument on a regular basis and meant that the
monument could easily be forgotten by the majority of Paris’s bourgeois and more upper-class
citizens. Despite this and despite the significant distance of this location from that coveted space
near the porte de la Muette, Klotz and Labbé, ultimately accepted the Service Director’s offer
and attempted to capitalize on the fact that the monument was still within the bounds of Paris
and, thus, still a part of the landscape of the capital of France.

In this final location, then, the Monument to French Mothers bordered what was known
as the “zone,” a strip of 778 hectares of extra-muros land that ran parallel to the old
fortifications. Because this area had already become closely associated with a social and moral
renewal of France, the monument’s close proximity to the “zone” intensified its message of
regeneration. Beginning in 1919, officials of the City of Paris made plans that they hoped would
transform what had largely been an unofficial and makeshift area of squalid slums and dangerous
living into a neighborhood of amicable mixing of the various rungs of society. They hoped to fill
the ring around Paris with cheap apartments (habitations à bon marché), a smattering of middle-
class apartment blocks (immeubles à loyer modéré), and just a few upper-class residences.70
They also planned an extensive system of gardens and parks that would transform the area into a
“green belt” (ceinture verte) intended to achieve similar goals.71 Cutting across most ideological

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70 This project began when the French State officially gave the City of Paris control of this area on April 19, 1919.
71 When French urban reformer Henri Sellier proposed rather innovative plans for sixteen garden suburbs around
Paris between 1916 and 1939, he hoped to transform the idea of metropolitan expansion by using green spaces and
boundaries, this conception of the “zone” was based on a desire to use the ideals of the past to move Paris toward a brighter future. Romanticizing utopian dreams from French history, many of those involved in the project were swept up by what Rosemary Wakeman terms “nostalgic modernism,” that set the tone for the widespread debate that surrounded these planned renovations.”

Occupying a large space in an area that had taken on such great rhetorical significance during the interwar years, the monument also staked a claim in the future of French national identity and, by association, intricate negotiations of class and military power. Intellectuals and historians like Marcel Poëte attempted to pinpoint “the essential qualities of *Frenchness*” during the interwar period, and, as they did, social unity and class relations took on great significance. Within this context, the mothers of the *Monument to French Mothers* could become a unifying icon for the different classes, while the zone surrounding the monument impressed many commentators as capable of becoming “a reliable haven of social peace.” Indeed, according to Roxanne Panchasi, the proposed changes to the area operated as a symbol of “an accord between the Parisian middle and upper classes that dominated the city center and the working classes who had…moved increasingly to the suburbs extra-muros.” By increasing the livable space in Paris parks to give new life to the city. According to Rosemary Wakeman, this idea of the “green belt” can be traced to Ebeneezer Howard’s 1902 treatise on the *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* that linked the “restorative qualities of nature” to a “radical transformation of the social and physical enviroments” of a city. See: Rosemary Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 21, 27. See also: Cannon, *The Paris Zone*, 126.

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73 Wakeman, “Nostalgic Modernism,” 121.


75 Panchasi, *Future Tense*, 58.
and providing safe and pleasant neighborhoods for both rich and poor, the redevelopment of this area could provide citizens of all classes a place where they could live comfortably side-by-side.\textsuperscript{76} Thus, despite its past associations with ramshackle communities of poor laborers and factory workers as well as ragpickers, gypsies, carnival performers, prostitutes, and criminals, the “zone” was reconceptualized as a space of great potential in terms of urban renewal and class harmony.\textsuperscript{77} In popular imagination, then, the redevelopment of the “zone” was believed capable of facilitating a return to a utopian past when social groups lived harmoniously side-by-side.

At the same time, proposed changes to the “zone” inspired commentators to consider the possibility of new futures for France in terms of national strength and safety. If, as Panchasi explains, “the future anticipated at a particular historical moment can tell us a great deal about…the present doing the anticipating,” then the various imagined futures attached to the redevelopment of this land reveal desperate hopes for population booms and better protection and defense in future wars.\textsuperscript{78} Beginning with Arthur Rozier’s 1915 proposal for a “Greater Paris,” horizontal expansion of the capital city seemed to provide a solution to the ever-increasing problems with overcrowding and congestion in central Paris. While allowing the historic city center to remain intact, this plan looked to the future by providing space for further (anticipated) increases in population size.\textsuperscript{79} In terms of national security, some of the major players in the project worried about the real and symbolic implications of the demolition of

\textsuperscript{76} Of course, in reality, the redevelopment projects had their limitations, including the intense aesthetic clashing of new high-rises built in the vicinity of the monument’s future location and the run-down, overcrowded shanty villages visible just beyond the extent of recent renovations. See: Ibid., 127.

\textsuperscript{77} Cannon, \textit{The Paris Zone}, 4.

\textsuperscript{78} Pancashi, \textit{Future Tense}, 4.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 58.
Paris’s protective walls. Rozier, however, believed that the proposed replacement of the walls with housing, green spaces, and industrial and administrative areas was seen as “a concrete application of the spirit of the newly formed League of Nations.” By removing the old (and, by that point, ineffectual) line of defense, he insisted, the French would symbolically demonstrate their “trust that the League of Nations better shelter it from wars than the outmoded fortifications that were intended to defend it.” Thus this project to “modernize” the city accommodated imagined futures of increased population sizes and social harmony.

Placed in this area, the *Monument to French Mothers* joined the rhetoric of national identity that emphasized both class relations and fears of future war. Acknowledging its location near the old fortifications, the monument takes on some qualities of a protective city wall in its imposing structure. The pronatalist themes of this monument, moreover, tie it to contemporary debates about the future of the French border. Established as early as the end of the Franco-Prussian war, widespread rhetoric in France insisted that a low birthrate would leave the country vulnerable to attack. Imagined as “discontinuous” and “flawed,” the line of the defense that families created implied an underdefended nation, open to attack from Germany, a country imagined to have a strong birthrate and ample manpower to defeat a weakened France. In visual imagery, this argument took on various forms. By the 1930s imagery like Henri Royer’s postcard

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80 Panchasi examines how, during the interwar period, the Maginot Line “emerged as an antidote to the fear of attack, invasion, and defeat.” “Despite its limitations,” she explains, “the Maginot Line became a military and cultural symbol of total impregnable.” The fortifications around Paris seemed to have been considered in a similar way: though they were ineffectual by the time of their demolition, they provided a sense of security to French citizens. Thus the anxiety about their demolition. See: Ibid., 58 and 79-96.

81 Ibid., 58.

82 Ibid., 60. Such concerns expressed by Rozier’s opponents must be understood, however, in the context of idealism over reality. Since the Franco-Prussian war, the walls had been considered less and less useful to the capital city and after the changes in warfare experienced during the First World War were, for the most part, considered obsolete. See: Cannon, *The Paris Zone*, 2-4.
design from the 1920s that depicted a vulnerable border with Germany had placed the “frontier” at the heart of discussions on French territorial security (fig. 1.19). Within this context, the Monument to French Mothers stands as a marker of hope. Not only was its location made possible because of the needs of an expanding Parisian population, but it presents viewers with the equivalent of a sturdy wall, fortified with loving mothers and growing families. Where the walls of the old fortified city were once located, a new wall of prolific and upstanding, though underappreciated, mothers now stood guard.

The difficulty of reconciling this ideal with the reality of so many families living in the thirteenth arrondissement, however, caused a breakdown of the image of stay-at-home motherhood. From the nineteenth century onward there was a tendency in the upper classes to impose their domestic values on the women of the lower classes, but many working-class women earned a living by working either inside or outside the home. By contributing to their families income, these women, however inadvertently, thus “undermined the naturalized status of the bourgeois domestic ideal.” So, too, the working women of the arrondissement undermined the ideal of sacrificing stay-at-home mothers of modest station. Thus, where the representation of Boucicaut and de Hirsch in the seventh reaffirmed values already at play in its neighborhood, the ideals given visual form in the Monument to French Mothers actually clashed with the necessities of the working class families living in the outskirts of the city.

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83 In this image, a mother and her four children stand in front of a demographic map of the departments of France. The mother, clutching a baby in one arm, points to the border with Germany. The map is dominated by black areas that indicate departments in which the number of deaths exceed the number of births. The border with Germany is quite dark and, as such, left dangerously open to attack. Panchasi does not discuss this image, but does consider this phenomenon: Future Tense, 106.

84 Roberts, Civilization without Sexes, 12.
In both neighborhoods, then, the monuments brought out not the universal nature of but the complicated class issues inherent in the ideal of motherhood in French culture. The affluent Boucicaut and de Hirsch, though not represented as mothers themselves, offer much needed aid to a young family and embody the care-giving maternal ideal of upper-class femininity. The women of the *Monument to French Mothers* take up a strong stance where the city’s protective wall once stood, offering the hope and promise of a protective wall to keep the nation safe but, at the same time, represent a completely unrealistic goal for many of the impoverished families in the area. Thus the monuments’ subjects and themes were tailored to their respective neighborhoods and, as such, played into the class divisions that still shaped the geography of Paris.

**French Mothers: Issues of Race and Identity**

In addition to class, race also played a major role in interwar definitions of national identity and influenced both the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* and the *Monument to French Mothers*. The idea of a distinctly French heritage perpetuated biases against immigrants and even citizens with non-French ethnic backgrounds. Within the monuments, the idea of race certainly comes into play. In the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, Osiris, the donor, has placed a fellow foreign-born Jew, de Hirsch, alongside a prominent French Catholic, Boucicaut. In the *Monument to French Mothers*, the name itself could be understood as excluding the large immigrant population that flocked to Paris in the aftermath of World War I and, in large part, concentrated in the “zone.” Once again, the translation of ideals into visual form and placement of these representations within the city drew out the complexities of these grand ideals and left room for complication and disruption.
From the time Osiris’s will made the initial call for the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch until the monument’s inauguration, racial prejudices and tensions were building in France. Of particular significance to the monument, antisemitic sentiments were prevalent. Since the revolution of 1789, Jewish people had many more possibilities for social mobility and integration into state institutions in France than in other European countries. This meant that they were able to rise to particularly prominent positions in the French urban economy. Though they were actually relatively few in number, anti-Semitic opinion greatly inflated Jewish influence in the private sector and, according to Paula Hyman, cast “the development of finance and industrial capitalism as a Jewish plot.” Indeed, extremely popular anti-Semitic books like Edouard Drumont’s La France juive of 1886 accused Jews of exploiting the poor and polluting French society. Moreover, despite their citizenship status and political participation, Jews were considered “quintessential foreigners” whose ideas and lifestyle clashed with and even threatened true “Frenchness.” During the long-lived and greatly divisive Dreyfus Affair of 1894 to 1906, scathing newspaper articles made extreme accusations, and public displays of physical violence even erupted in the streets. While the affair was allegedly concerned with whether artillery officer Captain Alfred Dreyfus had committed treason, much of the debate centered on racial and religious prejudice. It was Dreyfus’s identity as a Jew that, for many,

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87 Ibid., 93.

88 This book was so successful that it sold more than 100,000 copies the year of its publication and was reprinted 200 times and translated into six languages by 1912. See: Hyman, The Jews of Modern France, 96-7. And Stephen Wilson, Ideology and Experience: Antisemitism in France at the time of the Dreyfus Affair (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), especially “Chapter V: Drumont La France juive and la libre parole.”

89 Hyman, The Jews of Modern France., 96.
proved his guilt while, for others, proved that a corrupt military had singled-him out as a scapegoat.\footnote{Indeed, Dreyfus was innocent and had acted as a scapegoat for Ferdinand Waslin Esterhazy’s crime of leaking military secrets to the German Embassy. But Alfred Dreyfus’s name was not cleared for twelve years. See, for example: Stephen Wilson, \textit{Ideology and Experience}; Piers Paul Read, \textit{The Dreyfus Affair: The Scandal that Tore France in Two} (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012); and James F. Brennan, \textit{The Reflection of the Dreyfus Affair in the European Press, 1897-1899} (New York: P. Lang, 1998).} Though many sources that explore the Dreyfus Affair and its aftermath focus primarily on the images of manhood that developed at this time, this affair affected women, too, and in the intense debate surrounding this scandal, in turn, led to exaggerated images of women failing to conform to bourgeois ideals of femininity.\footnote{Journalist and playwright Gyp, for example, was described as a “Valkyrie drinking human blood” who would “walk the poorest streets of Paris, without a corset and in sleeveless gowns that exposed her muscular arms, in search of street thugs who might be hired to disrupt Dreyfusard meetings.” Christopher E. Forth, \textit{The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 138.}

In this historical context, the Jewish identities of Osiris and de Hirsch take on increased significance. Hoping to leave his mark on his adopted country, Osiris no doubt also meant to reinforce his own “Frenchness.” Many of his monuments were dedicated to Joan of Arc and other Catholic heroes of French history. Moreover, by memorializing de Hirsch, and placing her with a successful French Catholic, his monument to these women reinforced the legitimate and charitable influence of Jewish women in nineteenth-century France. As the wife of a prominent investment banker and aristocrat de Hirsch does fit the stereotype that Jews in France were primarily concentrated in the upper levels of the private sector. In her role as Charity she counters related stereotypes of Jews viciously exploiting “the simple people, the workers and artisans.”\footnote{This idea comes from Drumont as discussed by Hyman, \textit{The Jews of Modern France}, 97.} Moreover, despite her position of prominence in the monument, her respectable fashion, demure body language, and soft features cast her as a model of bourgeois femininity,
rather than the representation of the monstrous Jewess that became so prominent during the Dreyfus Affair.

At the same time, the inclusion of Boucicaut, a Catholic and prominent owner of the Bon Marché, could also have served to dampen negative associations between Jews and department store culture as well as Jews and Catholics. As Paul Lerner says in a study of a similar phenomenon in Germany, “the association between Jews and department stores ran so deep that…the phrase ‘Jewish department store’ would have sounded redundant.”93 Beginning even before the time of the Dreyfus Affair, French public opinion developed a strong, negative association between the department store and Jewish people. “The Monopolist” who, it was understood, was Jewish, supposedly “destroyed the old France by introducing factory production, the railroad, and the department store,” all of which “crushed” and “ruined” small, natively French, businesses.94 The “life-threatening forces of large-scale organization” that “polluted” French society also “exploited” many vulnerable people, not only by mistreating workers but also by duping consumers with cheap tricks.95 As a result, physical and verbal attacks on Jewish storefronts were vicious and continuous. The well-known and highly influential Boucicauts, however, were of non-Jewish French descent. And thus any changes they brought to French culture came from within the nation. Moreover, they were Catholic and, though antisemitism in France at this time was in great part secular in formation and function, it


95 Hyman, The Jews of Modern France, 97; and Stephen Wilson, Ideology and Experience 281. Such sentiment was so prominent that it even figured in the 1898 election campaign in Paris. See: S. Wilson, 281-2.
was also “strongest among Catholics or in ‘those milieus which claimed to be Catholic.’”

Marguerite Boucicaut, by contrast, worked to promote a personal image as an accepting Christian, who made charitable donations to various religious groups, including Jewish synagogues. In this way, she became a symbol of non-racist Catholicism. As the personification of Goodness and as the charitable de Hirsch’s companion in their monument, then, Boucicaut may have worked to dispel some of the popular negative assumptions about Jewish businesspeople and department stores while simultaneously promoting an image of more amicable relations between Catholics and Jews. Moreover, the mother figure in the monument unites Boucicaut and de Hirsch in a common cause.

By the late 1930s, when the Monument to French Mothers appeared, the arrival of “unprecedented numbers of immigrants and refugees” in general, and the “zone” in particular, had only intensified the insular and prejudiced social and political climate. Critics of the immigrant population had moved to positions of prominence and, in the face of depopulation anxiety, once again began to highlight the importance of a “true” French race. Though Jews were still a prime target, as their numbers had increased from 150,000 in 1919 to 300,000 in 1939, an influx of other postwar immigrants from Eastern Europe created an atmosphere of more generalized anxiety. Afraid that non-French laborers and professionals would take the few

96 Stephen Wilson, Ideology and Experience, 565.

97 Of course, there was a prevalent idea that non-Jewish department store owners were in bed with the feared Jewish tyrants in order to protect their own business interests. Ibid., 281-2.

98 For a time in the 1920s immigrants benefitted from a more accepting climate; even as late as 1927, legislation was passed to enable their naturalization, under the auspices of “immigrants to Frenchmen.” Julie Fette, Exclusions: Practicing Prejudice in French Law and Medicine, 1920-1945 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 31. Cannon discusses this prejudice in the context of the zone. Cannon, The Paris Zone, 128.

employment opportunities left for “real” French citizens, workers, from working- and middle-class jobs and professions as well as “elites” such as doctors and lawyers, took to the streets to protest the saturation of their job markets with foreigners. Ultimately, in a context influenced by depression, xenophobia, and the powerful and intimidating rise of Nazism, these workers received legislative protections designed to reserve the majority of French jobs for white French men.

By the time that the Monument to French Mothers was built discussions of the “zone’s” future, which was intimately linked to France’s destiny, had become imbued with the “ambient xenophobia of the interwar period,” which ultimately led to a renewed focus on “Frenchness.” Though in some senses, attempts were simultaneously made to bring inhabitants of the zone closer together, the idealized class unity that would supposedly save this area was generally focused on the happy co-habitation of white French citizens from all different economic sectors. Criticizing the United States’ solution to depopulation—the replenishment of their numbers through immigration—prominent spokesmen like Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population president Paul Haury urged the French to repopulate through increased birthrates. At the same time, organizations like the Croix de Feu (Cross of Fire), perpetuated the ideal of a distinct French race. “We have a heritage to protect,” wrote journalist Henri Sirolle, “that of our race, in which our mental spirit lacks nothing and includes in its beautiful history heroic

100 Fette, Exclusions, 32.
102 Haury used America to “prove” his point, writing that in the United States, “the exploits of gangsters and child-murderers demonstrate that there is something disordered in that country, whose traditions have been swamped by a flood of too many heterogenous immigrants.”
103 Caroline Campbell, Political Belief in France, 1927-1945: Gender, Empire, and Fascism in the Croix de Feu and Paris Social Français (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 111-12.
events resulting from its strength.”104 As Benedict Anderson has shown, such racism and antisemitism manifest themselves within national boundaries, justifying “not so much foreign wars as domestic repression and domination.”105 If, as he writes, “dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of class rather than in those of nation,” then it is no surprise that the “zone” which had been understood as full of impoverished and working-class citizens came to be associated with “unclean” foreign populations capable of “eternal contamination.”106 Examined alongside the xenophobia of the 1930s, then, the utopian dream to create class harmony in this area, which included a movement of middle and upper classes to the periphery, implied not only a gentrifying of the zone, but also a replacement of the “contaminating” immigrant populations with “true” French men and women.

The Monument to French Mothers certainly participated in the perpetuation of racial exclusivity, beginning with its official title, which specifically identifies French mothers as the special recipients of this honor. In form, the figures displayed in the monument appear to conform to an Aryan image of the French population. The various “types” placed on either side of the central relief present a variety of workers and classes commonly associated with traditional white France at the time: the bourgeoise, the artist, the nurse, the scholar, the farmer, the miller with his wooden clogs. The words “French Mothers” carved prominently behind the central mother and her children further insist on a specific ethnicity. Moreover, the rhetoric leading up to the final monument as well as Le Matin’s chronicling of the project took on this exclusive, albeit abstract, idea of racial heritage. Much as the earlier article in the Revue de

104 Henri Sirolle, “Une France forte, une jeunesse heureuse,” La Vie Hébertiste (November 1937), quoted in Campbell, Political Belief in France, 111.

105 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 150.

106 Ibid., 149.
l’Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population spoke of the need for mothers to prevent the demise of the “principle countries of the white race,” later articles in Le Matin stressed that the ideal of motherhood could “facilitate the reconciliation that everyone desires” and ensure the “future or our race.”

“The monument to the sublime mothers,” Klotz wrote, “will stand as a call to all French people.”

In the outskirts of the thirteenth arrondissement, where many immigrants lived and raised their families, this monument’s message to “all” French people likely seemed limiting. If the typical viewers were immigrants who had been denied jobs in favor of “real” French men and who may have been concerned about their children’s future in their adopted country, an emphasis on rebuilding the population through “native” rather than “foreign” blood would have been an exclusionary message indeed. In this context, the hope that the Monument to French Mothers expressed, in relation to class unity and patriotism, was also determined by a distinctive racial narrative that excluded immigrants from participation in French ideals while attempting to build up a collective awareness of patriotism and duty.

Collective Identity: Feminism and Women’s Roles in the State and Society

As commemorative structures intended to strengthen the image of the Third Republic and reinforce proper participation of men and women in French society, these monuments became markers of collective identity. The men involved in both projects carefully chose and manipulated the representations to convey specific beliefs and values attributed to the French collective before and after the First World War. By attempting to forge a “consensus version” of women’s involvement in the French nation, such representations reflect the interests of the


108 Ibid.
community’s most prominent social and political groups. By insisting on these interests, they attempt to create a “dominant memory” that will overrule individual experiences or histories.¹⁰⁹ In addition, these monuments were intended to perform the “cultural work” of “providing society with ways of thinking about itself, and offer[ing] projects for transforming it.”¹¹⁰ As the issues of individuality, modernity, class, and race have shown, however, the visual form of the monument left too much open to viewer interpretation. Unlike the words of the calls to build, the visual form of the monuments allowed for Boucicaut’s and de Hirsch’s individuality to shine, for the non-maternal roles of women in French society to be commemorated, and for the exclusivity of French bourgeois femininity to become more apparent. Thus as Sherman has shown, on their own monuments are unable to articulate a specific enough message to ensure a seamless rewriting of a community’s collective identity. Instead, accompanying texts, such as articles about a monument’s inauguration, help to ensure the appropriate interpretation of the work by its public. In addition to articulating the rhetorical intent behind a monument, such texts also attempt to “block or erase potentially contestatory readings.”¹¹¹

The texts related to both monuments include Osiris’s will, biographies of Boucicaut and de Hirsch, articles supporting the earlier Boucicaut monument, and Le Matin’s chronicle of the Monument to French Mothers project; together they constitute an official rhetoric that functions to record the intended meanings of the two works. In these texts, the officials associated with both projects attempt to override the non-specific nature of artistic representation and work toward erasing the issues and complexities inherent in such representations of women. Whereas

¹⁰⁹ Sherman, The Construction of Memory, 7.

¹¹⁰ This idea of “cultural work,” comes from Jane Tompkins whom Sherman discusses in Construction of Memory, 7.

¹¹¹ Sherman, The Construction of Memory, 203.
the texts related to the Boucicaut and de Hirsch project serve as a record of attempts to erase these women’s individuality and personal identities, the texts in *Le Matin* capture the conservative desire to promote the birthrate and insure that motherhood stood out as women’s most important and even heroic function available to all women of the nation despite their station or class. In these ways, the texts downplay and even overrule the importance of the issues discussed above as well as the ever-changing image of women created by feminist movements, women’s suffrage, and women’s important role in various jobs and professions before and after World War I. Instead, the texts work to place the monuments’ female subjects in the idealized role of the good, loving mother who loses herself in her devotion to her children or those in need of her maternal aid and who remains officially silenced as an individual with political and social desires and needs. Again, then, as with the calls to build, these texts work to maintain a universal ideal and draw attention away from the issues inherent in such thought.

An exploration of texts related to Boucicaut and de Hirsch and their monument must be divided into two categories: first, biographies and earlier calls that relate to the women and, second, texts related directly to the official project. The two sets of texts set up conflicting narratives about the two women, and like the monument itself show the complexities of navigating independence and bourgeois femininity during both their lifetimes and the first decade of the twentieth century. Biographical news articles and, in the case of Boucicaut, earlier calls for commemorative action, focus more on details of their individual lives and place independence and initiative alongside, and even above, the maternal. The texts specifically related to Osiris’s monument project, on the other hand, stress more generalized and idealized narratives of their maternal and allegorical roles in society and omit any details that promote a sense of their independence or individuality.
A number of newspaper articles lauding the influence of Marguerite Boucicaut (néé Guerin) attribute her success to her business acumen and promote an image of her independence. Though, as Miller writes, the details of her life are actually “simply unknown” and though historical records show her playing only a nominal role in running the Bon Marché department store, certain newspaper articles insist otherwise.\textsuperscript{112} In \textit{Le Temps}, for example, her obituary implies that she was more or less her husband’s business partner, working beside him and supporting him as they built “their” innovative store.\textsuperscript{113} Echoing this sentiment, \textit{Le Monde Illustré} proclaims that she was not only “associate and sometimes counselor” to her husband but that she was “a director of unparalleled activity, reason, and intelligence.”\textsuperscript{114} Moreover, a letter written by feminist Maria Deraismes and published in \textit{Le Gaulois} similarly highlighted Boucicaut’s business expertise and called her “an admirable organizer who, through exceptional faculty and tireless work, placed herself in the vast business world and applied, following the experimental method, grand and fruitful theories of socialist doctrine.”\textsuperscript{115}

While the details of de Hirsch’s biography do not cast her as very unconventional, glimmers of a less traditional life do appear in certain articles. Born in Austria to a wealthy banking family, she received training in banking that was uncommon for girls at the time. This

\textsuperscript{112} Miller, \textit{The Bon Marché}, 45.

\textsuperscript{113} “Mme Boucicaut n’était pas seulement la digne continuatrice d’Aristide Boucicaut…on peut dire qu’elle a été de moitié dans toutes les créations de son mari. Sous leur direction commune, toute une organisation nouvelle de la vente au détail a été constituée,” “Dernières Nouvelles,” \textit{Le Temps}, December 9, 1887, 4. This same passage appeared in other papers, like \textit{Le Petit Parisien}, in the following days.

\textsuperscript{114} “Madame Boucicaut,” \textit{Le Monde Illustré}, December 17, 1887, 397-8.

\textsuperscript{115} “Il ne s’agit pas seulement de célébrer la femme charitable, bienfaisante, maternelle pour ceux qu’elle emplis, mais encore l’admirable organisatrice qui, par des facultés exceptionnelles et un labeur incessant, s’est placée dans un vaste cadre commercial et a appliqué, suivant la méthode expérimentale, les larges et fécondes théories des doctrines socialistes, en introduisant la justice dans les rapports économiques par une équitable répartition.” Deraismes, “Le Statue de Mme Boucicaut,”, 2.
provided her with the skills and knowledge to work at her father’s bank as his private secretary until her marriage to Maurice de Hirsch, whose business interests would ultimately bring her to Paris. Supposedly the inspiration for Maurice’s philanthropic endeavors, de Hirsch maintained and expanded upon these charitable activities on an international scale after his death. An article in *Le Monde Illustré* details her efforts. Not only did she found twenty-five *pensions* (boarding houses) for French women in need and provide the funds to build the biology laboratory at the Pasteur Institute, she also founded a sanatorium in England and a school for working girls in the United States, and supported various charities in Germany, Russia, Austria, and Hungary.\(^{116}\) An article in *Le Temps* aptly summarizes: “her inexhaustible charity spread to all countries.”\(^{117}\) Moreover, this article explains, in remembrance of her influential generosity, the Pasteur Institute engraved “Fondation Baronesse de Hirsch” in gold lettering at the entrance to the biology institute, where the majority of scientific conferences for the 1900 exposition would take place.\(^{118}\)

As discussed in chapter one, the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth were a heyday both for feminist activity and scathing critiques of the growing independence of women. As Christine Bard writes, “at the turn of the century, feminism was in vogue.”\(^ {119}\) Feminists during this period made many demands, including the right to vote, the right to education, and the right to work and for equal pay. They “created journals, held


\(^{118}\) Indeed, in articles on de Hirsch, unlike those on Boucicaut, references to her independence and initiative are much rarer and more interspersed with accounts of her motherly charity. At her funeral, for example, the grand rabbi of France M. Zadoc-Kahn maintained that she “never had any thought but one: to use her vast fortune in the noblest way possible.”

conventions, founded associations that reflected the variety of their preoccupations and their ambitions, their political preferences, as well as their talents.”\(^{120}\) In sum, feminists agitated for changes and took actions that, as Bard observes, “affirmed the legitimacy of ambition, production, and passion in a woman’s life.”\(^{121}\) Such confidence and affirmation invariably met with critique as many influential figures in France, male and female alike, clamored to prevent change and maintain the illusion of static and firm gender divisions. Counter-arguments and sentiments gave rise to images like those in *L’Assiette au beurre* that grossly caricatured feminists in ways intended to repulse and frighten magazine readers.

The texts that highlight the strengths of Boucicaut and de Hirsch undermine fearsome antifeminist representations and instead affirm these women’s legitimacy and influence. Most powerfully, the theme of motherhood that runs throughout even the most progressive of these articles tempers any progressive claims with a familiar ideal. An American article on Boucicaut’s role as the head of the Bon Marché, for example, insists that she ran the business as if it were a large extended family and “felt gravely the responsibility of her position as *mother* to so many children.”\(^{122}\) Even feminist Deraismes casts Boucicaut’s role at the Bon Marché in terms of maternal love, even if she also took on “so much more.”\(^{123}\) In relation to de Hirsch, many accounts stressed her maternal instinct. They used the loss of her only biological son in 1887 and subsequent adoption of two other boys to show that she could not live long without acting in

\(^{120}\) Ibid., 9-10.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 10.


\(^{123}\) In part, this maternal role may stem from the paternalistic approach that the Boucicauts took to their business, casting it as a large family rather than a cold-hearted capitalist enterprise. Though in the context of these articles, it seems as though it is intended to balance a notion of her agency as a modern woman with any sort of business acumen or unconventional power.
some maternal capacity. Thus these articles employ the idea of motherhood to assure readers that Boucicaut and de Hirsch were not aberrations, but paragons of conservative femininity who were still, despite their success in other capacities, devoted to the fulfilment of maternal instinct.

The texts related directly to this monument project, however, touch only on the conservative, idealized aspects of these women’s lives, leaving much less room for interpretation or speculation as to their independent influence on French society and business. Osiris, of course, wished for them to become allegories of Charity and Goodness, and newspaper articles on this monument reinforced that aspect of the final work. In the majority of blurbs on the monument, journalists stressed that it was meant to commemorate two “good women,” implying their adherence to bourgeois femininity. In a small notice in Le Temps, erroneously titled “The Boucicaut Monument,” an anonymous author describes the women as “monumental” to such an extent that they become “decorative.” Published under the telling title, “Goodness and Charity Glorified in Marble,” another article in Le Temps similarly highlights their allegorical function. According to this article, the monument is “powerful, strong, and simple,” boiled down to the allegorical abstractions of these women’s bourgeois caritas and their roles as “mothers to society.” Thus, the monument project locked them into the abstracted notion of “good women” and, despite the nuances of Boucicaut’s and de Hirsch’s life and any unconventional power or education they may have had, emphasized their maternal role in society.

Beginning with Klotz’s call in 1935 and culminating, after a series of front-page articles, with an account of the inauguration two years later, texts concerning the Monument to French Mothers in Le Matin insisted on traditional themes and ideals. The “sublime” French mothers had


reached a pinnacle, according to these texts, achieving the ideal height of maternal duty and success. Staff of *Le Matin*, positioned on the far right of French politics during the interwar period, would have been familiar with the fears that few, if any, of these traditional women still existed. But through the careful tracking of the project on the front page of the paper and a larger-than-life description of the monument’s inauguration, this monument became a marker of an *already* renewed strength that would, in its success, motivate French women to conform to its ideals. A closer examination of the two articles that bookend this series reveals that the narratives of the newspaper emphasized traditional gender divides and ideals of motherhood that abstracted and silenced living women.

Playing on readers’ emotions, articles in *Le Matin* placed mothers into a discourse of admiration and sacrifice and insisted that monumental immortalization was the highest honor anyone could receive. Drawing on the belief that maternity was a woman’s duty to the country, these discourses were also designed to encourage others to emulate its ideal. Textual representation of the *Monument to French Mothers* in *Le Matin* was steeped in the language of military honor, casting mothers as a “heroines” of France. Lucien Klotz called these women “sublime” and insisted in his initial call that the maternal “ideal” could “reunite all brave men and facilitate the reconciliation that everyone hopes for, that is indispensable to the future of our race.”126 By building a tangible effigy to these dutiful and honorable mothers and by insisting that such women can and do exist, the *Monument to French Mothers*, according to Klotz, “acts as a call [to duty] to all French people.”127 The monument was thus cast as a symbol capable of

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126 At a time when xenophobic sentiments were rapidly rising and for a newspaper with fascist sympathies, “true” French mothers became even more important to the future of the country.

127 Klotz, “Les Mères Sublimes doivent être citées à l’ordre de la nation.”
calling the French to action and reinvigorating the population in ways that would ensure a hopeful future for their country.

Despite general attempts to cast mothers as the equivalent of soldiers, a trend that Klotz supports by calling mothers to duty and casting them as heroines, women and men did not have equal influence in the political sphere. Though in some ways feminism was less prominent after World War I than before, it had certainly not disappeared. In fact, Bard argues that during the interwar period “the feminist movement adapted, diversified, [and] grew” before declining on the eve of the Second World War. Continued attempts to secure women’s voting rights led to many suffragist articles in newspapers like La Française and to political cartoons like Marcelle Botton’s “Ceux qui ne votent pas, comptent pas,” discussed in chapter one. Significantly, in Botton’s image the woman without rights depicted is a mother. Both because married women with children had so few rights and because the rhetoric of motherhood attempted to position women outside of politics, a mother was an apt figure to reference the inability of most women to be heard and to officially influence major political and social decisions.

The Monument to French Mothers, however, poses something of a challenge to this cartoon’s assertion. Not only did articles in Le Matin emphasize the monument as a symbol of women’s importance in the French state but the sheer size and weight of the structure and its figures visually contradict Botton’s message. The influence that these women supposedly held was as moral, rather than social or political, entities. As Daniella Sarnoff explains, conservative ideology of the time, which was strongly influenced by fascism, “positioned women as the moral force of the nation…the troops of national and moral regeneration” and, as such, “the heroic

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128 Bard, Les Filles de Marianne, 10.
saviors of both the nation and the family.” Organizations like the Alliance Nationale pour l’accroisement de la population who launched powerful antifeminist attacks during the interwar period, supported this framing of motherhood and femininity as they pushed patriarchal notions of the family. Indeed, as Cheryl A. Koos explains, many politicians and cultural commentators on the extreme right called for men to be “strong, virile, and dynamic” while women should be “passive, violable, and physically weak and in need of protection.” As articles in Le Matin insist about the mothers commemorated in the Monument to French Mothers, they are symbols of “humanity’s greatness” that could “prevent the masses from doubting their moral valeur.”

Though Klotz’s call carefully shaped interpretation of this “good work,” it did not stand in isolation. Continued reiterations of the monument’s importance and its messages appeared in Le Matin at each stage of the project with slight variations of this rhetoric, a program that culminated in detailed accounts of a grand inauguration in 1938. Commemorative rituals such as inaugurations act similarly to monuments themselves, functioning “most notably as idealizing representations of the communities they seek to shape.” By projecting forward to a large community celebration, texts in Le Matin capitalized on the event’s power to “present the community to itself as unified and harmonious.” When a great crowd of people gathers for one

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129 Daniella Sarnoff, “An Overview of Women and Gender in French Fascism,” in The French Right Between the Wars: Political and Intellectual Movements From Conservatism to Fascism, eds. Samuel Kalman and Sean Kennedy (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 157. Though this quote comes from a discussion of fascism, rather than a more generalized French right, these sentiments were held by many different conservative factions at the time.


131 Klotz, “Les Mères sublimes doivent être citées a l’ordre de la nation.”

132 Sherman, Construction of Memory, 264.

133 Ibid.
purpose, as it did to celebrate the completion of the *Monument to French Mothers*, it appears both to transcend the divisions of daily life and to fully support the ideals the monument represents. Ceremonial fanfare, then, took up an important role in representing the power and popularity of the monument’s ideals and so became an important part of the newspaper’s narrative.

Published on October 24, the day after the monument’s official unveiling, the description of the ritual played an important role in the pages of *Le Matin*. In excerpted form, the speeches and fanfare of the day became something of a double representation. Not only did the ceremony itself attempt to establish the monument’s proper narratives, but, only partially transcribed in the article, it became another representation of the hopes and views upheld in the pages of *Le Matin*. Making no attempt at subtlety, the headline ran, “The Monument Glorifying the French Mothers built under the patronage of ‘Le Matin’ was inaugurated yesterday by [president] M. Albert Lebrun, More than 50,000 people paraded in front of this symbolic work.” Labbé and his fellow committee members had insisted that the monument would need to accommodate large crowds and this inauguration demonstrated why. Vast numbers of people, including “the most representative personalities of the Republic,” paraded down the Boulevard Kellerman to gather at the statue. Not only did the French president and first lady preside over the event, but the Commissioner of the 1937 international exposition as well as other significant politicians, and many of their wives, made a unified show of homage. The greater body of citizens was represented through various groups and organizations including honored veterans and boy scouts who, coming together as a united community, “paraded in front of the monument until
nightfall.” As a commemorative ritual this ceremony displayed to the French nation its own unified and renewed population. Including images of the crowds, supposedly so large they defied calculation, the paper emphasized their immensity (fig. 2.25). Marching in long lines, these crowds employed a supposedly strict, military sense of order that could have acted, in light of pronatalist fears, to further demonstrate the continuing order and might of the nation.

In addition to this demonstration of order and strength, the article emphasizes the power of the French mothers’ love and plays on religious overtones to increase the perceived emotional impact of their project. The paper describes this as a particularly “moving” inauguration in honor of the “devoted” and “self-sacrificing” mothers that took place at the “heart” of France. The “pure,” “profound,” “constant” and “intense” maternal love that gave the sublime mothers their honor had pulled the country through the “the bitter days that we so recently experienced.” Meant to mark the start of a “new day,” then, the monument was charged with reminding a corrupted modern society of the “nobler” causes in life. Moreover, as the drapery was pulled from the monument, they write, “the warm rays of autumnal sunlight caressed [the monument] with a golden patina,” an effect they claim gave the monument a halo of glory.

In addition to these emotional and aesthetic descriptions, the article incorporated an excerpted documentation of the dedicatory speeches that, while continuing to honor the mothers, insist on their silent place within the home. Villey, the prefect of the Seine, maintains that the heroic mothers “demand no compensation and do not wait to be honored”; instead the secret pains and efforts and their private joys poetically make up “the most beautiful books in the world that will never be read.” To this image, president of the Municipal Council of Paris Gaston Le Provost

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134 This is as much detail as the paper gives. They do mention that many people left bouquets and so it seems that this parading or filing in front of the monument was the movement of the crowd as people came close to see the details of the central scene.
de Launay adds that “These sublime mothers…[are satisfied when] their child one day becomes a man.”135 Both of these speeches take into account the prevalent fears and anxieties of their day: with economic depression and women clamoring for independence and political rights, people worry that French women will refuse to have children without significant monetary compensation or because they do not want to be tied to the home.136 Still, these mothers, supposedly representative of living women, happily pursue child-rearing as their only goal. They expect no monetary compensation and thus will not be deterred by economic depression or a weakened government unable to support them. Instead, Launay insists, these sublime mothers “has no other goal than to raise their child…[who] will one day become a man in whom all will recognize strength, intelligence, [and] human worth.” This is what the sublime mother “silently offers” her country.

Finally, the paper carefully molds the image of the living women in attendance at the dedication to this very image. Women’s organizations and nurses mixed into the “vast” and “fervent” crowd responsible for a “most spontaneous, most moving, most unanimous homage.” According to the paper, the crowd (conveniently gendered in the French language as female), respectful of the serious tone of the ceremony, allowed security officers to channel them into an orderly line that “during long hours [from three o’clock] until nightfall” filed “piously” before the Monument to French Mothers, bearing humble flowers as a symbol of their “poignant witness” of this monument’s inauguration and success. In addition to these women, the wives of the speakers

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135 Interestingly, in the context of this chapter, this provost was elected from the 7th arrondissement where twenty-four years earlier the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch was built.

136 Landry’s Act of March 11, 1932 had generalized the family allowance (allocation familiale) for all employees (outside the agriculture sector) to help supplement the income of any families with pre-school aged children. But this income was not a direct benefit for stay-at-home mothers. Indeed, because of the restrictions still in effect under the Civil Code, married women had to defer to their husbands in the management and spending of any household income. And so it was still important to stress women’s lack of desire for monetary compensation.
also came to the ceremony to give their “full” support. In particular, Mme. Lebrun echoed the actions of the crowd and took on an appropriate model of feminine behavior. After the closing remarks meant to unite everyone in a “display of peace and fraternity indispensable to France and to human destiny,” the silent first lady, cheered respectfully by the crowd and accompanied by her husband and Labbé, placed a “magnificent” bouquet of chrysanthemums at the feet of the monument’s central figure. Discussed only in terms of their respectful silence and subdued, submissive actions, then, the women at the ceremony supposedly reflected the obedience, dedication, and silence prescribed by the monument and by texts and speeches like de Launay’s. These great masses of living women described and shaped by the newspaper’s rhetoric testified to the possibility that the ideal of patriotic “sublime mothers,” on which Le Matin’s numerous articles had insisted, could and did exist.

In an attempt to control interpretations of the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch and the Monument to French Mothers, donors, committees, and journalists published and circulated texts that carefully explained the messages behind the monuments. Though early articles on Boucicaut and, to some extent, de Hirsch gave the sense that these women were successful individuals, Osiris’s call and subsequent articles on the monument stressed more conservative interpretations of their importance and instead attempted to cast them as allegories. The articles that graced the pages of Le Matin similarly locked women and mothers into an ideal and, in this case, maternal role. Working to override feminist triumphs or the clear importance of women in France outside of the home, they insisted on the social and political silence of mothers, attempting to idealize the glory of quiet sacrifice.
Conclusion

Despite the impression of clear and widely-accepted messages given by the texts relating to the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* and the *Monument to French Mothers*, these monuments, their calls to build, the sculptors involved in the projects, the locations, and even the textual representations of their subjects and themes all involve an intricate negotiation of gender and politics that sheds light on the complexities of French motherhood and society between 1910 and 1940. A mix of modern aesthetics and traditional ideals, the women in both monuments bridge past and present, bringing the historical expectation that women would remain in the home to a contemporary context. If they are examined through the lens of the textual discussion of each project, it seems that they are representations of the universal perfection and accomplishment of motherhood. As visual representations with a physical presence in the city of Paris, however, the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* and the *Monument to French Mothers* expose themes from female independence and agency to issues of class and race. In their visual form, these images cannot be interpreted as simple or seamless representations of a timeless ideal of motherhood. Instead, both monuments involve a navigation of gender norms and ideals in the face of greater national issues, including economic crisis, demographic change, immigration, and antisemitism. These monuments are thus testaments to the difficulty and complexity of negotiating gendered identities in early-twentieth-century France. Despite the power of the allegorical messages and lofty goals of these monuments, the men involved with both projects, Osiris, committee members, Moreau-Vauthier, Bouchard, Descatoires, Klotz, and Labbé, could not easily insist on a vision of women as self-sacrificing and silent when, despite their limited political and social rights before and after the First World War, women were actually active individuals constantly navigating and negotiating the social and political systems from which
they were officially excluded. Thus even representations of motherhood intended to reinforce conservative cultural values could not completely elide the complex nature of maternity in twentieth-century France.
CHAPTER 3
Emptiness: Questioning the Ideal of Motherhood through Absence

Unlike the Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch and the Monument to French Mothers which for the most part inadvertently underscored the complicated reality of French motherhood, other artworks functioned to overtly and quite pointedly destabilize widely-accepted ideals and expectations. During the first half of the twentieth century, the idea of emptiness crept deeply into French culture. It assumed the power of loss—loss of life, of health, of fulfillment, of happiness—as well as the power to evoke the unexpected, the illogical. By self-consciously exploring what the literary scholar Mark Sandberg has called the “fundamental absence” of representation, artists in a number of different fields played with a sense of vacancy to highlight the “obstinate ontological gulf” that separates the living from the representational.\(^1\) Indeed, the idea of emptiness became a catalyst for a variety of striking images, including representations of mothers and their children. Giorgio de Chirico’s The Painter’s Family (1926), Tamara de Lempicka’s Maternity (1928), and Francis Picabia’s Mother and Child (1939-40) all engage varying forms of emptiness as they give unusual visual form to the theme of motherhood (figs. 3.1-3.3). Their paintings, often described as mysterious or enigmatic, engage different aspects of absence to not only explore losses that in many ways defined the interwar period (loss of prewar

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culture, loss of life, loss of traditional forms of femininity) but also to negate conventional meaning and emphasize philosophical void.  

These three paintings send no straightforward messages but instead play with layers of significance that work to disassemble structures of logic and conventional expectations.

In part, these artists achieve this destabilization through the careful representations of figures whose forms complicate the relationship between living and non-living, between modernity and absence. Each of the figures in their works evokes a sense of lifelessness and absence that places a gulf between viewer and subject. For de Chirico and de Lempicka the ubiquity of the shop-window mannequin and its ever-changing form reveals a source of inspiration. Epitomizing the glamor and selling the luxury and lifestyle of youth, emancipation, and financial and sexual independence, by the mid-1920s mannequins had become as important a topic of consideration as the clothes they wore. Yet as the symbol of the “potential and pitfalls of modernity itself,” the “artificial and denatured” mannequin also represented, according to commentators like feminist sympathizer Jules Bois, a troubling emptiness. Beginning with the eerie wax mannequin that evoked the macabre and continuing as designers updated the fashion mannequin to match the abstractions and simplifications of avant-garde aesthetics, the

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2 In this chapter the terms “emptiness,” “absence,” and “void” all describe the essence of the phenomenon captured in the work of de Chirico, de Lempicka, and Picabia. If “emptiness” is the general term for the feeling that something has been intentionally omitted or uncomfortably left out of these paintings, it is the “absence” of certain expectations that creates a sense of a “void” in their work.

3 For de Chirico, as discussed at length below, the shop-window and mannequin figure combined with the form of the tailor’s dummy and marionette-like figures of the theater world to create the figures seen in paintings like The Painter’s Family.

4 This can be seen in the importance of mannequins at the 1925 International Exhibition of Industrial and Decorative Arts. See: Tag Gronberg, Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 101-110.

connection between dummy and woman created an uncomfortable link between living and lifeless, a quality carefully exploited in *The Painter’s Family* and *Maternity*. Similarly engaging the tension between animate and inanimate, Picabia turned, not to the ubiquitous fashion mannequin, but to another object popular during the interwar period: the death mask. Much like the early wax mannequin, which appeared in both the fashion industry and the macabre wax museum, the death mask evoked the relationship between life and death. Thrilling in its assumed connection to the deceased, the death mask, like the mannequin, brought out uncomfortable connections between representation and absence, an attribute that defines the emptiness in *Mother and Child*. Each artist thus drew on familiar forms to engage and explore themes of lifelessness, separation, and vacancy in their work.

Centered on figures capable of evoking varying qualities of absence and lack, *The Painter’s Family, Maternity*, and *Mother and Child* urge viewers to consider differing aspects of emptiness as related to interwar culture and thought. Closely connected to the contemporary theater world, de Chirico points toward philosophical and metaphysical vacancy in his representation of faceless, mannequin-like mother, father, and child. De Lempicka’s and Picabia’s paintings, by contrast, not only engage the metaphysical, but also evoke a cultural dimension that is lacking in the highly conceptual *The Painter’s Family*. In *Maternity*, de Lempicka draws on connections between lifeless mannequin and living *femme fatale* to create an absence of thought and love in a representation with intimate connections to the modern world of fashion. In *Mother and Child*, by painting figures with closed eyes and mask-like features,

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6 Though de Chirico’s writings contain no specific reference to the fashion mannequin, the form of figures in paintings like *The Painter’s Family* clearly resonate with the increasingly simplified form of the modern fashion dummy.
Picabia creates a scene in which life and death seem held in careful suspension, generating an uncomfortable mystery and even sense of danger with which viewers must engage.

Despite these differences, however, in each of these images, absence becomes a critical tool in destabilizing the traditional associations of motherhood so prevalent in contemporary culture. At a time when motherhood stood as an icon of humanity, replete with meaning, full of hope, love, and life, these images challenge the very foundation of a cultural ideal. In unique ways, de Chirico, de Lempicka, and Picabia ask viewers to contemplate the fabrication of meaning, to question “inherent” truths, and to consider alternatives to the supposed logical and natural order that assigned women to procreation and housework. Their paintings situate motherhood as a site of a complex enigma and unsettling emptiness and leave viewers questioning the conventions and rational structures generally perpetuated during the interwar period in France.

**Giorgio de Chirico: The Theatrical Emptiness of *The Painter’s Family***

In the mid-1920s, as he explored what he dubbed the “metaphysical,” Giorgio de Chirico made significant changes to his work. As he began to engage with emptiness in new ways, he moved away from many of the qualities that had defined his oeuvre up to that point and turned his attention to new subjects and themes. The mannequin figures that now began to dominate his paintings confounded logic and expectations and disappointed many of his contemporaries who had previously looked to his paintings for inspiration. Since then, many scholars have dismissed

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7 Moreover, in each of the works, the sex of the child with the mother is left ambiguous. While this is not a detail explored at length in this chapter, it does work to emphasize these images as general “types.” This, in turn, allows them to better engage with, counter, and/or contradict other images of generalized, supposedly universal mothers and children.

8 In particular, the Surrealists had lauded him as progenitor of their movement. He was included in portraits of the group, like Max Ernst’s *At the Rendezvous of Friends* (1922) and André Breton wrote essays praising his work. See,
these figures and the representational and stylistic changes that accompanied them as failing to achieve the same level of artistic innovation as his earlier efforts. These assessments, however, overlook the intentionality of the emptiness inherent in his interwar paintings. As a deliberate creative device the absence in such images can be understood as carefully crafting enigmas with the power to destabilize tradition and structure.

One of the many paintings in this much larger body of artwork, *The Painter’s Family* (1926) reworks traditional Holy Family compositions in ways that challenge the ideals of de Chirico’s contemporary society. Centering on a mannequin mother, child, and father, this painting confounds easy interpretation. Though the family huddles close and though the mother is even poised to feed her child, the mannequins call attention to what most artistic representations sought to repress: these figures are in fact lifeless. Without attempting to provide a clear alternative message, de Chirico’s silent mannequins work against other contemporary images of stabilizing, life-giving motherhood. Rather than a figure filled with an abundance of warmth and love, his mannequin mother, along with her partner and child, is an inanimate shell. The power in this image, therefore, does not lie in its ability to promote an ideal that could inspire French women to adopt a conventional role. Instead, its power comes from its ability to reveal that the idea of such a mother, and such a family, was just that—an idea, open to interpretation, that could be changed or even forgotten, that, at its core, might even be as empty as the figures in this painting.

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Grouped together as two adoring parents gazing at their infant, these figures seem perched on the long straight boards of a stage with an orange and grey backdrop lowered behind them. They are each posed as if “cheating out” toward an audience. In many ways, they closely resemble tailors’ dummies: black discs sit on their shoulders in place of arms and, rather than faces on their large, ovoid heads, they have sketchy lines roughly marking an eye-line and a midline (figs. 3.4 and 3.5). At the same time, their simplified features and forms recall the increasingly pared-down form of modern fashion mannequins by designers like Siégel and Pierre Imans (fig. 3.6). Moving away from the original objects, these dummies also have awkward architectural growths springing from their torsos, as well as legs that are impossibly short. In contrast to the gray and white skin tones of the father and child figures, the golden skin of the mother mannequin makes her stand out as the focal point of this image. Her large breast is the direct center of the composition and she, unlike the other two, has been given a long, strong arm with which to support her squirming infant. The easel behind this family unit displays a sketchy image that not only doubles the representation of the bizarre mannequins but also creates a feeling of destabilization as it appears to dissolve into the shimmering background. Charged with such enigmatic elements, the picture becomes an unexpected and confusing representation of the idealized Holy Family trope.

Because this painting is a part of a larger body of work that critics and scholars have long found lacking, little scholarship explicitly addresses *The Painter’s Family*. Yet, as part of that larger body, the unexpected contradictions and confusing reworking of a traditional subject could be understood as producing a work that lacks convincing illusion, critical depth, and noble artistic goals. In the same year that de Chirico completed this painting, the surrealists André Breton and Max Morise complained that his latest work had been emptied of all the significant
qualities (invention, creative vision, evocative portrayals of the unexpected) that had previously
given innovative artistic meaning to his earlier work. Morise wrote that at the same time that de
Chirico’s newest paintings were quite classicizing with their clear connection to ancient
sculptural forms they were also filled with “unintelligible signs.” But, he declared, “I cannot
resign myself to not understanding [the meaning of his work].”breton similarly lamented a
supposed loss of “greatness,” writing that de Chirico’s paintings of the 1920s centered on
“substandard conclusions, of which the least we can say is that spirit [l’esprit] is totally
absent.”Such critiques, in turn, made a large impact both on de Chirico’s contemporary
reputation and on the way succeeding generations of critics and scholars would evaluate works
like The Painter’s Family. Despite de Chirico’s published rebuttals to these
“misunderstandings,” as recently as 2012 Juliet Bellow observed that scholars “still tend too
often to dismiss most of the artist’s postwar output as overly nostalgic, insufficiently critical, and
just plain kitschy.”

11 Juliet Bellow, Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian avant-garde (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 212. Even the few scholars interested in connecting his artistic practices to the theater have continued to perpetuate a rather simplistic approach to the theatricality in his work. Art critic and curator Francesco Poli, who insists on a close relationship between the artistic goals of de Chirico and theater practitioner Edward Gordon Craig, locates the theatricality of de Chirico’s paintings in their scenographic qualities. He writes that “de Chirico’s pictorial vision derives from the definition of a stage set—architectural figurative space with boundaries of appearance that are well-traced out, but unstable.” See: Francesco Poli, “Statues, Shadows, Mannequins,” Nature According to de Chirico, ed. Achille Othoni Olivia (Milan: Federico Motta Editore, 2010), 136 (my emphasis). Also, Marianne Martin who attempts to rewrite de Chirico’s connection to theatricality and the theater focuses primarily on these sorts of elements. She identifies: the use of compositional elements like curtains, stages, placement of objects and figures to evoke “his particular brand of quasi-illusionism;” de Chirico’s tendency to conceptualize his life as a drama; and the inspiration he drew from his many theatrical collaborations with his brother Alberto Savinio among other theater figures of the time. See: Marianne Martin, “On de Chirico’s Theater,” in De Chirico (New York: MoMA, 1982), 81-100.
In addition to this supposed lack, scholars have since highlighted the theatrical qualities of de Chirico’s paintings of the mid-1920s as further robbing them of meaning and import.\textsuperscript{12} Understood as a simplistic borrowing of costumes, gestures, and compositional features, as well as an easy way to solicit viewer appreciation, theatricality was often seen as a system of “devices, tricks, strategems” that pushed any art dangerously toward kitsch. According to critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, theatricality in the arts generally employs “disingenuous” and “artificial” constructions whose success relies on “vicarious and faked sensations” rather than medium specificity, persuasiveness, or dramatic illusion.\textsuperscript{13} In other words, as such authorities would have it, for art in general theatricality is an often undesirable quality that cannot create profound meaning within or elicit profound understanding from an artwork. What these frustrated and dismissive commentators overlook is the possibility that such theatricality and emptiness could be intentional devices used to explore a metaphysical dimension of the art form.

Recently, however, scholars in theater and art history and theory have revisited definitions of theatricality and begun to explore creative and complex uses of this phenomenon in visual art. Influential theater scholars have defined theatricality as something beyond a

\textsuperscript{12} Bellow connects the disdain for theatricality to the “fiction” of “autonomy and medium-specificity retrospectively imputed to modernism by American critics including Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried.” See Bellow, \textit{Modernism on Stage}, 3.

\textsuperscript{13} These adjectives are quoted from Greenberg, \textit{Art and Culture}. Certainly the disdain for kitsch that scholars have used to devalue de Chirico’s paintings of the 1920s, stems from Greenberg’s critical essay of 1939. According to his work, where true art was inspired by the medium itself (the properties and even limitations of paint inspired innovations in painting) kitsch was formulaic and disingenuous. See: Clement Greenberg, \textit{Art and Culture: Critical Essays} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). In the 1980s, Fried built on this earlier theory, equating disingenuous kitsch with theatricality. Both, he argued, were “artificial construction[s]” and both “sacrificed” persuasiveness and “vitiating dramatic illusion “in the attempt to impress the beholder and solicit his applause.” See: Michael Fried, \textit{Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
“concrete property” or a “strictly theatrical phenomenon.” As a “process” through which, Josette Féral has argued, viewers perceive the events, acts, or tableaux presented to them as part of an “‘other’ space, no longer subject to the laws of the quotidian” where he or she “has no place except as external observer.” In this way, argues Kati Rötger, theatricality complicates and transforms viewers’ awareness by “inserting a gap between beholder and beheld that pervades their relationship with alterity…[and] suspends the fundamental constituents of the belief in perception.” In other words, theatricality in visual art asks viewers to adopt a perspective that holds truth and deceit, reality and illusion in equal suspension. The resulting “duplication and self-referentiality, self-consciousness or even an infinite regress” can give an artwork “meta-” qualities that suggest infinite layers of meaning, knowledge, and self-awareness. Rather than a simple borrowing of theatrical images or elements, then, de Chirico’s use of theatricality acts as an attempt to change the way his viewers understand perception and awareness by pointing them toward the metaphysical.

Though he never fully elaborated on this use of theatricality in his work, in 1920 de Chirico did hint at such an approach in an essay on Max Klinger’s Crucifixion of 1890 (fig. 3.7). In this text, de Chirico argued that an artist can intentionally employ theatricality to “exploit a certain bizarre and metaphysical appearance that actors assume upon the stage.” As a “desired


17 Van Eck and Bussels, “The Visual Arts and the Theater,” 21.
and conscious” element, theatricality, he insisted, could actually “augment” the spiritual power of a painting and draw out the “metaphysical side” of the subject represented. While de Chirico failed to explain precisely how this goal is achieved, or even to distinguish between the intentional and unintentional use of theatricality, the “bizarre and metaphysical appearance” that he identifies in Klinger’s painting hints at a more complex and meaningful use of this phenomenon.

Mixing this attitude toward theatricality with his personal interpretation of Nietzschean philosophy, as early as 1917 de Chirico began developing what he called a “metaphysical” approach to art. For de Chirico, profound meaning did not exist in representational subjects or objects but instead lay beyond the unstable, flawed, and relative systems of language, truth, and knowledge. Only visual images that strike us in “moments of pure non-sense” have the power to reveal this separate state of awareness. Because of this, as Italian literature scholar Simona Storchi explains, de Chirico’s goal was to “resignify the object, stress the conventional quality of any semantic attribution, and expose what he called the object’s ‘enigma,’ that is, the inaccessibility of its deep meaning.” In other words, he highlighted convention in his work only to expose it as merely one faulty approach to any given subject. By seeking a “deletion of the logical sense in art,” de Chirico thus hoped to emphasize “the deep significance of the non-


19 Working in tandem with former futurist Carlo Carrà, de Chirico developed the idea of Pittura Metafisica in 1917. Yet after a six-month collaboration the two men parted ways and afterward would each claim to have first invented metaphysical painting. For more on the history of metaphysical art, see: Massimo Carrà, with Patrick Waldberg and Ewald Rathke, Metaphysical Art, trans. Caroline Tisdall (New York: Praeger, 1971), esp. 1-19.

meaning of life,” an aspect that he believed formed “the inner skeleton of an art really new, free and deep.”

In this way, de Chirico hoped to communicate, and ultimately share, the artist-philosopher’s experience of the “senseless and quiet beauty of the material” and the “terrible emptiness” of the infinite.

Because de Chirico worked closely with theater practitioners, including, especially, his own brother Alberto Savinio, the void in his work can be further illuminated by scholarship on emptiness in the theater. According to French theater scholar Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, in fact, artists in all “representational arts” began to philosophically engage with the “inner emptiness” of their media during the interwar period. As they attempted to self-consciously explore and acknowledge this conventionally hidden void they manipulated the settings and subjects in their

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21 Giorgio de Chirico, “Noi metafisici,” (15 February 1919) in Fondazione de Chirico (Rome: Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, n.d.), 89. (All translations from Italian are mine, unless otherwise noted.) While visual artists do not deal directly in written language, throughout history the art world has pushed toward work that can be “read.” The historical development of “iconography,” the study of subject matter that leads to classification of themes, motifs, symbols, etc. as well as the standardization of image formulas, has enabled viewers to “read” familiar stories, commonly held beliefs, and other clearly defined information in visual art. So while de Chirico’s work does not deal directly with semiotics and semantics, it still addresses and rejects the supremacy of a conventional system by moving away from narrative, illusionistic techniques, and subject matter. Working in pictorial form, de Chirico thus attempts to destabilize what we see in order to point us toward something more profound.


23 de Chirico, “Noi Metafisici.” His written statements concerning the metaphysical directly inspired the work of Italian playwright Massimo Bontempelli. See Simona Storchi, “Massimo Bontempelli.”

24 For an explication of de Chirico’s involvement and connections with the theater world and the impact such relations had on his work, see my article: “In Search of the Void: Metaphysical Theatricality in Giorgio de Chirico’s The Painter’s Family and Emptiness in the Arts,” Text and Presentation 12: 154-72. Briefly, while the tailor’s dummy inspired the visual form of his mannequins, it was his theatrical collaborations that inspired its use. Alberto Savinio’s and Guillaume Apollinaire’s “man without ears, without a mouth, without eyes” influenced de Chirico’s adoption of this figure and, according to Francesco Poli and Ara Merjian, theater practitioner Edward Gordon Craig’s “über-marionette” inspired his metaphysical approach to this subject. Moreover, throughout his career, de Chirico would see his mannequins in theatrical terms, referring to them as theatrical “characters” who had an enigmatic effect on the “spectators” of his scenes.” For more see: Willard Bohn, “Apollinaire and de Chirico: The Making of the Mannequins.” Comparative Literature 27 (Spring 1975): 153-165. Ara Merjian, Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City: Nietzsche, Modernism, Paris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) and Giorgio de Chirico, “Birth of the Mannequin,” Metafisica 1/2 (2002), 282.
work to underscore a sense of absence. By so doing, observes theater scholar Les Essif, these artists believed they could use the representation of “an alternative, truly fictional, realm” to move away from “materialist illusion” and instead reassert the “imaginary fiction” of their mediums. For de Chirico, as for theater practitioners, the surface-level illusions that had for so long filled the arts with narrative, life-like characters/figures, realistic props/objects, and illusionistic scenery had actually stifled creativity and prevented artists from inspiring non-referential thought. So, these artists believed, it was imperative to use a “unique, creative manipulation” of language and image to create “a psychic space” where “concrete ideas are suspended” and where neither man nor language functions as a point of reference. Standing in agreement with his counterparts in the theater, then, de Chirico attempted to push his paintings in the same direction they attempted to push their plays: toward an undeniable sense of vacancy and, as he wrote, “non-sense.”

In The Painter’s Family, the metaphysical emptiness of de Chirico’s work comes to light in the composition’s contradictions. Though the mannequin family seems inviting with warm

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25 Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, “The Invention of ‘Theatricality’: Rereading Bernard Dort and Roland Barthes,” *SubStance* 31 (2002), 58. He quotes Artaud: “Like life, like nature, thought goes from the inside to the outside before it goes from the outside to the inside. I begin to think within a void and from that void I proceed toward fullness; and once I’ve attained fullness I can fall back into emptiness. I go from the abstract to the concrete and not form the concrete toward the abstract. (“L’Homme contre le destin” 191-92).” 173

26 Les Essif, *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage: The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and His Generation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 20. I rely a great deal on this text because, as of today, it is the closest, most direct examination we have of emptiness in the arts. Though it is primarily focused on the stage image, L. Essif does draw in other representations and encourages further scholarship on this phenomenon in other media.


28 L. Essif, *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage*, 7 and 16. He explains, “Empty space is first and foremost a non-representational, non-referential space. However, as the phenomenologist Henri Bergson has argued, the only way we can conceive of the extralinguistic, invisible world is through a unique, creative manipulation of language and the apparently ‘real’ world.” 7-8.
skin tones and fleshy curves, their featureless faces and shadowy architectural growths are disconcerting. At the same time, the setting further accentuates a sense of emptiness. The small area represented is cozy but also oppressive, as it traps the mannequins within a tight space and denies viewers the narrative information they likely seek. Moreover, the background, a mesmerizing series of orange and gray brushstrokes, seems to be in suspension between shallow and deep space and to shimmer on the verge of dissolution and dispersal. At the same time that its presence delimits the mannequins’ space, it also invites viewers to get lost in a seemingly endless organic patterning. Examining the details of the cloudless, starless skies in many of de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings, Riccardo Dottori finds that “[o]ur gaze moves steadily further from the earth and gets lost in the infinity of empty space, the symbol of metaphysical nothingness.”29 In search of an enigma that could heighten his own painting to the profound level he sought, de Chirico thus charges the details of his work with a sense of contradiction and mystery that leads viewers toward a discovery of its metaphysical essence.

At the same time, by bringing the viewer’s focus to rest intently on a few figures in a tight, relatively bare space, de Chirico has created an intensification, a focalization of certain key elements, which continuously returns viewers to a sense of a void.30 Similar to the silent, introspective, marionette-like figures in the plays of nouveau théâtre dramatists, mannequins like the family in de Chirico’s The Painter’s Family act as a frame for an echoing emptiness.31

29 Riccardo Dottori, “From Zarathustra’s Poetry to the Aesthetics of Metaphysical Art,” Metafisica 7/8 (2008), 130. In The Painter’s Family we are not presented with the cloudless, starless skies that Dottori gives as examples of this phenomenon, but de Chirico has given us something even more removed from reality and consequently even more empty.

30 This is a key element that L. Essif has explored in the stage image, and I have borrowed the term “focalization” from his work. See: Empty Figure, 7-8.

31 As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, this empty figure made its way into the work of theater practitioners like English playwright and theorist Edward Gordon Craig who developed the “über-marionette,” a lifeless character intended to replace the living actor and inspire spectators to think past notions of reality or fiction.
Existing on the boundary between reality and fiction, vitality and lifelessness, his mannequins defy representational illusion and exemplify the fiction of a painter’s work. With their abstracted architectural growths, featureless ovate heads, and completely disproportionate legs de Chirico’s mannequins were, as he explained them, more “mysterious” than figures who seemed able to “get up, walk around...enter life’s grand illusion, in short, live!!” As “simulacra of the human figure,” these mannequins instead represent “a triumph of absence, the void, and the double.” Moreover, the “[imminent and pressing] absence of the human presence” in turn guides viewers away from language and logical thought and toward a wordless consciousness. Thus, the mannequin figures like the mother in The Painter’s Family were believed capable of transcending conventional systems of logic and understanding by denying the viewer’s desire to understand and establish “reality.”

Presented as a mix between figures and objects, the mannequins have archways and tunnels springing from their torsos. Opening into a deeply shadowed and presumably vacant

and toward the mysterious spirit beyond. See: Edward Gordon Craig, “The Actor and the Über-Marionette,” in The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader, ed. Teresa Brayshaw and Noel Witts, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 144. Later, writers like Samuel Beckett and theorists like Antonin Artaud, as well as playwrights like Massimo Bontempeilli expanded on and added new concepts to such early uses of the mannequin-like figure in an attempt to move further and further toward new modes of thought.


33 Poli, “Statues,” 137.

34 Ibid., 172, 174. In addition, Despite Ara Merjian’s recent insistence that the “simulacra” within de Chirico’s work ultimately remain wed to language’s “invisible filaments,” paintings such as The Painter’s Family actually break free from language’s systems and instead point viewers toward the metaphysical emptiness beyond. According to Merjian, de Chirico adhered to the “self-imposed limits of language” and refused to “liberate” his paintings from “the prison-house of figuration,” both of which created a “twofold disingenuousness in his paintings.” Yet in paintings like The Painter’s Family logical connections and expectations are denied: the family group is ultimately lifeless; the mannequins have missing limbs and architectural structures protruding from their torsos; and the canvas behind them melts into the background. By thus denying solid connections to conscious logic or meaning and confounding expectations that viewers may have of this sort of composition, such paintings evoke a great mystery. This enigma, in turn, points to the fabrication and fiction, the non-reality, of art. In this way, de Chirico elicits a different response in his viewers that ultimately asks them to consider a primal, wordless meaning. Merjian, Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City, 261, 274-5.
interior, the architectural structures suggest that these mannequin forms contain a void.  
In addition, de Chirico has included a doubling of the image on his canvas. Though the doubled image challenges a concrete interpretation of its presence or purpose as it dissolves into the background, it suggests a self-consciousness on the part of the artist. With their heads bent down away from the viewer’s gaze, de Chirico’s figures also have an air of introspection that, in turn, seems to echo, or double, the artists’ self-consciousness or self-reflection. Indeed, their faceless heads give the sense that these mannequins are, in fact, trapped inside their own minds. But, at the same time, as non-living mannequins they have nothing inside their heads—no brains, no language, thought, or feeling. In this way, each successive layer within this painting (the architectural growths, the dissolving canvas) “reveals the essential ‘emptiness’ surrounding the preceding not-quite-rational image.” Thus, as they point to a self-consciousness, these details simultaneously urge viewers to reflect on the vital emptiness that lies behind such attempts at self-awareness.

Through such carefully layered references to absence and void, de Chirico’s The Painter’s Family stands in contrast to more conventional representations of motherhood during the interwar period. Unlike an image such as Picasso’s Mother and Child (1921, fig. 8), The Painter’s Family denies the possibility of coherent understanding and challenges the power of an image to create a desired reality. Picasso uses powerful horizontal lines to create a stability and

35 This is further supported in Merjian’s recent work. Though concerned almost exclusively with paintings from the 1910s, he writes that the “Metaphysical city” and the mannequin bodies of de Chirico’s paintings “appear increasingly indistinguishable” in de Chirico’s later metaphysical work. Merjian’s overarching argument, however, contradicts a truly “metaphysical” definition of de Chirico’s work, insisting that the Metaphysical city “enthrones meaning again…as much as it deals it a blow” and ultimately “offers something intractably, indissolubly physical still” (257, 274, 275).

36 L. Essif, Empty Figure, 43. For L. Essif, the “specialization” of a subject, the air of introspection, and various clues as to the artist’s own self-reflection are key components of theatrical emptiness.
endurance that operates as, in Silver’s terms, a “testimonial to the fecundity of the race;” in contrast, de Chirico’s blurred, slightly curving horizon and dynamic background create a dizzying sense of disorientation that contradicts such hopeful messages. While Picasso’s mother and child are monumentalized, representational figures whose rosy skin and dynamic, yet intimate gestures are full of vitality, de Chirico’s figures move ever further away from the living with their missing arms, shortened legs and missing features. Like de Chirico’s mannequin mother, Picasso’s female figure has large, solid arms that wrap around her child to support him. Her arms, however, are expected extensions of her body and activate the image with movement, their protective force further underscoring the sense of an enduring ideal.

In contrast to such conservative trends, de Chirico’s image poses a problem. If a mother figure’s strength and vitality are connected in the wider body of interwar imagery to the strength and vitality of the French race, what does the lifelessness and immobility of de Chirico’s mannequin mother express? The mannequin mother cannot stand up and lead a country towards renewal. She cannot fulfill her wifely or maternal duties, cannot care for her household, love and obey her husband, or teach her lifeless child the morals that could supposedly ensure a secure future for French culture. For that matter, this painting seems to ask its viewers to consider what representation can do any of those things. In the face of urgent interwar cries for women to return home from the workforce and support their country through reproduction, what does this mannequin contribute? Calling into question human systems and logic, along with their emblems, de Chirico drains these figures of life and meaning and, in so doing, deprives representations of traditional families of some of their cultural power.

37 Silver, Esprit de Corps, 282.
On his canvas, the mother becomes a lifeless member of a mannequin family, a fragmented shell devoid of thought and feeling. Though de Chirico composes this family as the Holy Family and even uses conventional details like classical drapery to further bind them to tradition, he ultimately destabilizes the supposedly inherent meaning and significance of such imagery. But he does not trade one clear message for another; his work is enigmatic and denies the viewer any uncontested meaning. Instead, de Chirico uses these mannequins, including the central mother figure, to powerfully deny an ultimate, logical truth and reveal the emptiness inherent in conventional images and beliefs.

**Tamara de Lempicka: The Vacant *Femme Moderne* and Motherhood**

Working at the same time as de Chirico, Tamara de Lempicka painted a mother figure that, in addition to appearing isolated, disengaged, and vacant, also undermines traditional ideals. Despite an engagement with a more metaphysical absence, however, De Lempicka, unlike de Chirico, also explores emptiness in ways that emphasize its cultural dimensions. By depicting this mother as a modern woman with qualities that liken her to a fashion mannequin, de Lempicka played on contemporary anxieties about modern forms of femininity and female corruption. In general, de Lempicka’s female figures exuded independence and a liberated sexuality while their attitudes read as unconcerned with anyone but themselves.38 Glamorizing and even shaping the glamorous lifestyle of the modern woman, the women de Lempicka depicted drove cars, skied, and sported the latest fashions, including short haircuts, heavy make- 

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38 Scholars have often seen her paintings of disturbingly vacant women as glorifying the *garçonne* who claimed her social and sexual independence and who was conceived of, in popular culture, as responsible for the feminist movements of the time. See, for example: Gioia Mori, *Tamara de Lempicka: The Queen of Modern* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2011), especially pp. 21-63.
up, and tightfitting dresses. In their haute-couture fashioning, these women also reflected contemporary concerns about the woman shopper, a female type supposedly in constant danger of losing control of her desires and falling prey to kleptomania (and possibly prostitution) as she obsessively sought ways to obtain the “ever-new.” She also ran the risk of being left devoid of the traits (warmth, love, devotion, self-sacrifice) that would allow her to be a loving mother and wife. Seen as almost an empty shell of a woman, the femme moderne, like the figures on de Lempicka’s canvases, stood in contrast to the fulfilled ideal mother. By choosing to focus on such women in her work, de Lempicka thus engages with the sense of emptiness associated with these “unfulfilled” women.

In Maternity (1928), however, de Lempicka combines modern woman and mother in ways that rob cultural ideals of maternity of their traditional meaning. In this painting, it seems that a modern woman has become a mother, as so many contemporary novels and other sources hoped she might. Yet to what end? Her awkward pose and vacant stare do not create an image of a fulfilled woman. Rather, her attitude leaves a disappointing vacancy where love and gratification should be. Moreover, the metallic qualities and awkward gestures that recall the aesthetics of store-window mannequins connect this figure even more to the contemporary and, as some would have it, corrupting fashion world while also draining her of life. By creating this

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39 At the same time that women like Boucicaut and other nineteenth- and twentieth-century bourgeoises enjoyed the department store as a space of femininity where they could be seen in public without bringing their morals into question, critics of the department store exaggerated the possibility of consumerist corruption. Bourgeois femininity was based predominantly on women as givers: of life, of love, of self. So from the beginning the topic of women as consumers raised questions and fears. Miller discusses the history of these fears and the issue of kleptomania in nineteenth-century department stores in: The Bon Marché, 197-206

40 See for example: Victor Margueritte’s sequel to the infamous La Garçonne, in which Monique overcomes the infertility that prevented her from having children in the first novel and finds fulfillment in motherhood: Le Compagnon (Paris: E. Flammarion, 1924). See also the very similar: Clément Vautel, Madame ne veut pas d’enfant (Paris: Albin Michel, 1927).
image of an empty modern mother, then, de Lempicka challenges the idealized belief that all women will find purpose and peace by bearing children. On this canvas, the pleasant feelings of abundance associated with motherhood (overpowering love, profuse selflessness, effusive devotion) are overtaken by a sense of absence. Here again, as in de Chirico’s *The Painter’s Family*, a mother becomes an empty figure.

In *Maternity*, a breastfeeding mother and her baby are caught in a vulnerable moment of solitude. The baby is swaddled in a white blanket with an eyelet trim while the mother is draped in a bright pink wrap. An abstracted, geometrical background of shaded gray gives the sense of a very tight space and pushes the figures toward the foreground. Moreover, by cropping the image so close that it cuts off parts of both figures’ bodies, de Lempicka creates a confined, almost stifling scene. The mother’s head, craned down toward her child in a typical nursing mother pose, actually seems pressed downward by the upper border of the canvas. Her shoulders are angled both as if to accommodate breastfeeding and to fit the small space of the composition. Her hands and wrists also adopt jarring angles and give a sense of discomfort and unease. While the baby’s face is blocked from view by the low angle of the perspective, the mother’s face is in full view. Her jaw and mouth are set, unsmiling. Her short, shining helmet of hair, pearl earring, and heavy makeup show her to be a part of modern culture.

Yet it is her eyes that are the most striking, and the central source of the painting’s emptiness. Rimmed with black eyeliner, her light gray-green pupils seem eerily transparent, and her stare is vacant. Detached from the task and scene at hand, she seems listless and far away. Endless hours of nursing a new infant provide ample time to daydream and get lost in thought, and here de Lempicka has captured one such moment. Isolated in an unidentifiable and cramped space, this mother seems to have turned inward and yet come unfocused. The marked absence of
references to a realistic setting reinforce the impression of an inward turn, as does the tight focus on her upper body and face. But at the same time, the lack of background details encourages viewers to associate this void with the woman’s thoughts. Disengaged from her present setting and activity, this woman seems to have drifted off into an empty mind space.

Much as de Chirico’s painting clashed with traditional representations of motherhood, the mother’s isolation and disengagement in de Lempicka’s *Maternity* stand in contrast to other painted images of nursing mothers. In a strikingly similar, though more conventional *Maternity* (1905), Picasso also captures a young, dark-haired mother with a pearl earring, wearing a pink wrap and bending her head down toward her child at a rather extreme angle (fig. 3.8). Whereas the mother in de Lempicka’s painting lacks warmth and love, the mother in Picasso’s work has a concentrated gaze that shows engagement with her nursing infant, while the baby reciprocates by touching her breast. These details create an intimacy that not only sets up expectations about subsequent interactions (burping, changing, etc.), but also gives the impression of a deep, fulfilling bond. Picasso’s image thus upholds commonly held beliefs about motherhood and would have nicely matched viewers’ expectations.

With her disengagement, the mother in de Lempicka’s image defies the expectation of a traditional bond between mother and child as represented in works like Picasso’s. Not only does her glazed expression take her away from the scene at hand, the tight cropping of the frame creates the sense that her head is bent downward more out of spatial necessity than of desire to

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41 Ingried Brugger has noted the way in which the modern background designs in many of de Lempicka’s paintings separate her subjects from the world around them. See: Brugger, “Sang-froid and frenzy,” in *Tamara de Lempicka: Art Deco Icon*, ed. Alain Blondel (New York: dist. Harry N. Abrams, 2004), 36.

42 L. Essif discusses the connection between empty space and empty mind in the context of the theater: *Empty Figure*, 40, 126-7.
draw closer to her infant. Like the woman in Picasso’s painting, she is connected to her baby through the act of breastfeeding, but in this composition the contrast between the two figures’ skin tones as well as the lack of detail in the baby’s face create a separation or distance between them. This separation, in turn, heightens a “notion of alienation and rigidification” that gives the painting an enigmatic quality and empties this image of warmth, love, and human connection.

Indeed, critics and scholars have observed the mystery and absence in de Lempicka’s work in general as well as the cold vacancy of the mother figure in Maternity specifically. Contemporary critic Georges Rémon, for example, noted a “disquieting” and “perverse” spirit (âme) in her paintings, while a short article in La Semaine à Paris insists that de Lempicka’s work continually introduces new “surprises.” Going a step further, curator Jean Réau underscored the enigma of de Lempicka’s work, which he deemed “abstract,” despite its apparent focus on figuration. Her work, he writes, contains “impenetrable enigma,” “cosmic mystery” and “unbearable opacity” that are only “reinforced” through any attempts at interrogation. Likewise in Maternity, as she appears “absorbed by an internal dream,” focused on something inward and imperceptible, the mother figure’s thoughts in Maternity seem

43 Whose spatial necessity (artist’s or subject’s) remains unclear. Is she pushed downward by the frame of the painting by the artist’s hand? Has she chosen such a small, cramped space herself and the artist merely capturing these tight quarters?


impenetrable in their “distance from reality.” As Ingried Brugger notes, the inward turn of her attention and refusal to fully engage with her baby deny the viewer a clear understanding of their relationship or the mother’s thoughts and actions. Moreover, she observes, the mother’s “rigid gestures,” “cool gaze,” and seeming inability to take action all render her a “distinctly asocial” figure and “lock” her into an “isolated cocoon.”

In addition to this enigmatic, almost metaphysical emptiness, de Lempicka draws out a cultural dimension in her work through ties to contemporary consumer culture. Unlike de Chirico’s meta-mannequins, which emphasized a highly philosophical absence, de Lempicka’s mother figure, with her fashionable hairdo, make-up, and vibrant wrap, appears tied to a different form of vacancy. The lack of detail regarding this mother’s thoughts or her setting combined with her fashionable styling play on contemporary anxieties about the emptiness of the modern woman, particularly in relation to the fashion industry. The *femme moderne* was not only dangerously independent and headstrong, an unthinking slave to her own whims, but she was also perceived as driven by an insatiable hunger for new fashions and possessions. In the interwar conceptualization of the modern woman, the temptations of the fashion industry were considered a major draw away from the fulfilment of her role as selfless mother. Indeed, certain sources insisted that if a woman’s focus strayed outside the home she would be left with an absence of “certain qualities of charm, of heart, and of spirit” that would create within her a

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50 Ibid., 38.
“deviated soul” (ésprit dévié). This lack was perceived as such a resounding absence that it could, in fact, prevent the femme moderne from becoming a “real” woman and wife (femme).\textsuperscript{51}

For many, the deviancy and even sexual perversion that overtook many women shoppers attested to the emptiness of the modern woman’s lifestyle. As Tag Gronberg explains, the majority of advertising campaigns were directed at the female consumer, and the woman shopper, the “woman who wants,” was believed to be powerless against a “ravenous” and “fetishistic desire for the ‘ever-new.’”\textsuperscript{52} This persistent longing for novelty was, in such accounts, positioned as a hunger, a void that the modern woman could never satisfy or fill. What is more, this desire was so powerful that the woman shopper, who lacked the same power of thought or strength of will as her male counterpart, could easily fall prey to vice, in particular, theft.\textsuperscript{53} The work of psychoanalyst Gaëtan de Clérambault, for example, emphasized kleptomania as one result of the extreme forms of fetishism that overtook the woman shopper.\textsuperscript{54}

Although during the 1920s some medical professionals dismissed kleptomania as a fabricated psychosis that “does not exist in reality and should be relegated to the domain of legend,” in the

\textsuperscript{51} This commentary on the modern, independent woman comes from a letter published in: Henry Bordeaux, \textit{Le Mariage, hier et aujourd’hui} (Paris: E. Flammarion, 1921), 51.

\textsuperscript{52} Gronberg, \textit{Designs on Modernity}, 94.

\textsuperscript{53} As noted above, this concern began in the nineteenth century, but it continued to concern critics in interwar France.

\textsuperscript{54} He paints a picture of a female shopper turned kleptomaniac saying, “She had always been eccentric, impulsive, a spendthrift, in love with getting noticed, and excessively superstitious.” In such a description the potentially banal extravagance, desire for attention and perhaps even some of the impulsiveness of the woman shopper get enmeshed with eccentricity and superstition. Moreover, because he is discussing fetishes, the woman shopper’s desire for fine fabrics gets associated with sexual deviancy and perversion. In his account, he describes mothers whose children do not all belong to their husbands (implying that they were unfaithful to their spouses) and mothers whose children have died from (he implies) motherly neglect. Finally, throughout his argument he emphasizes that this weakness as a gendered phenomenon, arguing that men rarely fell prey to the same problems because they were not so subject to whim. See: Gaëtan de Clérambault, “Passion érotique des étoffes chez la femme,” \textit{Archives d’anthropologie criminelle de Médecine légale et de psychologie normale et pathologique}, XXIII (Paris: Editions Masson et Cie, 1908), 439-470. http://psychanalyse-paris.com/1908-Passion-erotique-des-etoffes.html.
wider public imagination it remained either a concern or fascination and was frequently articulated in terms of modern women who lacked control of their desires. Jean Valmy-Baysse, for example, writing in 1925, not only treated kleptomania as an extant disease but also insisted that “shopwindow thieves” (“voleurs à l’étalage”) were ninety-percent female—a testament to the perception that consumer culture was particularly dangerous to women. The out-of-control femme fatale also captured the French imagination as a dangerous fictional character in publications like the illustrated weekly Parisiana that published stories about kleptomaniac temptresses who preyed on respectable men. A victim of uncontrollable desires for ephemeral modern fashions, the woman shopper seemed haunted by the need for new dresses and accessories. In contrast to the fulfilled mother, who had achieved “completion” through maternity, these women were victims of an emptiness that it seemed they could not fill.

At the same time that de Lempicka’s mother figure is styled as a femme moderne who, unlike the good mother, was ever in danger of losing her sanity to consumer desires, her vacant expression, inaccessible thoughts, and motionless body emphasize a connection to the lifeless

55 This opinion communicated by Dr. A. Antheaume of the Academy of Medicine was reported in “A l’Academie de médecine: La kleptomanie serait une affection mentale fictive,” in La Sage-femme et le puériculteur (10 October 1925), 20-21.


57 A narrative in Parisiana from February of 1928, for example, follows a police inspector who finds himself seduced by a young, beautiful kleptomaniac. After he catches her stealing, he lets her go and she “repays” him with a brief sexual encounter, after which he loses not only his job but also the girl. At the end of the story, however, she reappears briefly as a reckless driver in a luxury car, a wealthy, indulgent beau in the passenger seat beside her. This representation of the kleptomaniac as a modern woman with a liberated sexual drive who recklessly drives cars and costs men their jobs is reinforced by the title illustration for this narrative. In front of the words of the title stands a young woman sporting 1920s flapper fashion, her hemline short and her bare legs long. Her face is obscured by her fashionable hat so she becomes a generalized type—a threatening any-woman. In addition, from the way she reaches out to the man in front of her, who more conservatively sports the hair and clothing styles of the turn-of-the-century, it is impossible to tell whether she is reaching out to touch him suggestively or to pick his pocket (either of which could provoke anxiety in viewers). Further reinforcing the association between kleptomania and the supposedly volatile flapper, a cartoon depicting two modern women with bobbed hair, one in popular “pyjama” fashion, the other smoking a cigarette and wearing little more than lingerie is placed at the end of the story.
modern mannequin. Unlike de Chirico, who painted dummies instead of people, however, de Lempicka did not co-opt the actual form of the often faceless, metallic modern mannequin. Instead, the details of Maternity hint at a link between female subject and inanimate counterpart. Adopting a stiff, awkward pose and blank stare, the mother figure recalls the unnatural positioning of shop window mannequins. The angularity of her bent head, arms, hands, and fingers further underscores such a connection. Even the shining, almost metallic sheen of her skin and hair emphasize her similarity to an inanimate counterpart. Such details, in turn, play on popular contemporary connections between the inanimate, empty figure and vacuous femme moderne. Insisting that “[the mannequin] spawned its fashionable and vacuous animate counterpart, just as it was created in her image,” early commentary by figures like Bois set the tone for a perceived link between mannequin and woman. During the interwar period, as mannequin designers moved away from the lifelike appearance of wax toward a new aesthetic, connections between “faceless and blank” mannequins and modern women further underscored artificiality and the absence of thought in both figures. Indeed, certain commentators argued

58 Brugger insists on the connection between metallic sheen and lifelessness, “Sang-froid and Frenzy,” 33. This, says Gronberg, allowed de Lempicka, to “convey something of the commodification of the female body that was such an important feature in interwar Parisian modernity.” Tag Gronberg, “‘Le Peintre installé par la femme:’ Femininity and the Woman Painter,” in Tamara de Lempicka: Art Deco Icon, 56. As Gronberg notes, contemporary critics often commented on the “hard, almost metallic-looking skin of her subjects,” the same quality captured in the new surfaces of display mannequins. See Designs on Modernity, 101-2. For example, director of the weekly l’Art et les artistes Magdeleine A-Dayot wrote that it was de Lempicka’s “pure colors with metallic reflections” that recalled these lifeless figures, while another commentator writing for La Semaine à Paris noted a “hard shine like diamonds” on her figures’ skin. A.W. « L’intéressante exposition de Tamara de Lempicka, » Comoedia 17 mars 1931.

59 Quoted in Munro, Silent Partners, 167.

60 Gronberg, Designs on Modernity, 83. Designers like Siégel and Pierre Imans were instrumental in these changes. Not only were the lifelike features of the display mannequin stylized and abstracted, but also the “overflowing styles of window display were disparaged as old-fashioned” and thus replaced by simpler displays. Gronberg discusses this transformation in Designs on Modernity, 80-88. For a contemporary perspective on the “excess” of the shop-window display, see Guillaume Janneau, “Le visage de la rue moderne,” Bulletin de la Vie Artistique (15 November 1924), 498.
that the mannequin’s increasingly slim figure and ever diminishing head created the impression that “to be in vogue, one must be brainless.”

In addition to a mental vacuity, the modern mannequin’s connection to certain changes in fashion and society further linked it, and modern women by association, to certain perceived losses in French culture. Representative of such associations with change and loss, the mannequins at the 1925 International Exhibition of Industrial and Decorative Arts not only stood in contrast to the figures and styles of the conservative “call to order,” but also played on fears of a lost gender divide. At this exhibition, newly simplified and abstracted mannequin forms showcased the work of influential designers from Paul Poiret to Coco Chanel. Emphasizing themes of desire and ephemerality, they modeled the sleek and controversial “look” of the femme moderne. In some ways, these mannequins upheld reconstruction ideals as they created “images of a vibrant, healthy consumer society that would attest to the success of social and cultural reconstruction.” As they glamorized the straight lines, short skirts, and bobbed hair of the subversive modern woman and targeted the volatile female consumer, they simultaneously emphasized threatening changes. Indeed, as they also underscored modern women’s roles as independent consumers and even successful producers, like Chanel, the mannequin displays blurred distinct lines between men’s and women’s roles in society and thus echoed the supposed loss of gender distinction that occurred during the war.

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63 Gronberg, Designs on Modernity, 99-101. For more on mannequins at the 1925 Exhibition, see pp. 99-110.
women shoppers and loss of control and connections between shaky gender divisions and loss of national strength, such themes, once again, point toward feelings of absence.

In de Lempicka’s *Maternity* the mannequin-like features of her female figure bring out this cultural dimension of loss and absence. Though this figure is a mother, the supposed antithesis of the threatening modern woman and mannequin, she lacks clear attachment to her child or any of the idealized self-sacrificing qualities of motherhood. Here there is no warmth, no fulfillment. Instead, on de Lempicka’s canvas the mother is fashionable, isolated, and empty. Her vacuous stare renders her inaccessible to viewers while her mannequin-like qualities urge them to see her not as a woman but as “an empty human frame, a paradoxical presentation of non-living body-as-lived.” Charging this canvas with an unresolved tension between life and lifelessness, mother and flapper, the mannequin-like modern mother of de Lempicka’s *Maternity* calls traditional female roles into question. Unlike de Chirico’s painting, with which he hoped to destabilize all meaning, de Lempicka’s image seems to have a more targeted subversion. In popular conservative constructions, the life-giving, fulfilled mother stands separate from modern and consumer cultures that could rob women of their souls. Still, by adorning her mother in the trappings of the modern woman and bringing out her connection to the lifeless, thoughtless fashion mannequin, de Lempicka undermines the notion that mothers and modern women inhabit separate spheres. Here, they are one and the same. Motherhood, this image implies, is not immune to loss, absence, or emptiness.

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64 L. Eissif, *Empty Figure*, 13.
Francis Picabia: The Absence of Life

More than a decade after de Chirico and de Lempicka completed their empty mother paintings, Francis Picabia created his *Mother and Child* (1939-40). Like de Chirico’s and de Lempicka’s images, this representation creates a barrier between viewer and subject and produces a sense of the void, but here Picabia asks viewers to engage less with philosophical vacuity and more with another form of absence, death. Like de Chirico’s mannequins, Picabia’s mother and child with their mask-like features create the impression that these figures are empty shells. At the same time, much like de Lempicka’s work, this painting engages themes that had great cultural significance in interwar France. In addition to the gaping, black doorway, the cool color palette of the painting and the figures’ sallow skin and shadowed features emphasize an eerie mood. At the same time, their odd, mask-like faces evoke a connection to the stillness of death. His figure pair also disrupts the common implication that mother and child imagery is innately or naturally bound to communicate a certain theme; unlike so many mother and child figures that were associated with abundance, springtime, and new life these two figures are vulnerable, hovering on the boundary between life and death.

Defying a clear reading, the figures’ closed eyes and mask-like features separate them from the viewer and underscore an impression of lifelessness. Like de Lempicka’s flapper mother, Picabia’s mother figure lacks an intimate connection with her child. At the same time, as with de Chirico’s shimmering backdrop, the painting’s background, here a shadowy doorway, emphasizes a theme of emptiness and diminishes a sense of this mother’s life-giving qualities. At the same time, however, the focus on loss, rather than lack, of life differs from either de Lempicka’s or de Chirico’s works. Completed in 1940, *Mother and Child* resonated with an interwar interest in death masks and death as well as prevalent fears that renewed hostilities with
Germany would put French women and children, the symbol of France’s future hopes, in grave danger. This dark image of a mother and child with closed eyes highlights vulnerability and mortality while accentuating the fiction of representation. It reminds viewers that these figures can just as easily be associated with death as they can with a renewal of life. Picabia’s painting thus falsifies “essential” associations between mothers, children, life, and abundance. Instead, Picabia, like de Chirico and de Lempicka, casts mother and child figures as empty shells, open to changeable meaning and, unlike the works discussed above, vulnerable to attack.

Clasping hands just above the bottom of the picture plane, Picabia’s mother and child stand facing the viewer. The scene is dark and cold—painted primarily in black, gray, and blue hues—and the mother’s and child’s faces are either heavily shadowed or smudged. Like de Lempicka’s mother figure, the maternal figure’s face is set in a stoic expression, the corners of her mouth turning down. The child’s face, by contrast, has a slight smile playing on its lips, a quality that gives it more potential for movement and life than the mother’s. The figures’ yellowish skin emphasizes their necks and faces as the primary subjects of the painting, but, at the same time, their closed eyes repel any connection with each other or the viewer.

Significantly, their faces appear separated from the rest of their forms. The deep black outlines used to delineate their features as well as the heavy shading under their chins distance their faces unnaturally from their necks. This emphasizes the mask-like appearance of the faces while the deep shadows, particularly under the mother’s chin, urge viewers to wonder what lies behind that façade. Almost as if in answer, the setting, as in de Chirico’s *The Painter’s Family* and de Lempicka’s *Maternity*, creates a sense of absence. The pair is placed in front of what appears to be the portal of a cathedral, its gray stone arches curving upward behind them. More important, however, to their right, just at the mother’s shoulder, a large black doorway looms. Its
heavy presence is broken up only by the mother’s arm and Picabia’s signature. Standing closest to this void and adopting the heavier, less lifelike facial expression, the mother figure seems almost like a bridge between the emptiness (of death?) and her child. Yet their clasped hands suggest that where she goes, the child will follow.

Similarly, in the wider, highly varied body of his work, Picabia’s compositions frequently resist interpretation. Indeed, both contemporary critics and art historians have seen his images as strange and mysterious compositions that deny logic and reason and attempt to plant new ideas in viewers’ minds. In a review of a 1927 exhibition of Picabia’s work at the Briant-Robert Gallery, for example, Waldemar George wrote that Picabia’s latest paintings were “illogical” works that “escaped the control of reason, of common sense.”65 Two years later, René Barotte declared that Picabia, “in a constant quest for new invention,” had become an “enigmatic creator of dreams.”66 Later scholarship suggests that Picabia’s art taps into a sort of spiritual or dream world intended to confuse logic and deny reality. For Marc Le Bot, Picabia’s particular blending of realistic imagery with abstract systems of organization has given form to “new symbols” that enabled him to “[translate] the ‘pure’ events of interior life [onto the canvas]” and to give “a sort of presence to spiritual realities.” This, in turn, inspires in the viewer a “renewal of physical sight [vision plastique] and an awareness of the intellectual activity that [sight] demand[s].”67 Sarah Wilson has also seen Picabia’s work as reinventing perception: his work, she has argued, “takes

65 Waldemar George, “M. Francis Picabia nous dit…” La Presse (20-11-1927), 5
66 René Barotte, L’Homme Libre (18 November 1929), 2.
art itself as dream material, mingling memories and colors to obtain a new reality.”68 Most recently, Anne Umland and Cathérine Hug, curators of a major Picabia exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 2016, argue that Picabia’s paintings “confound legibility almost to the point of incoherence.”69

While the figures in *Mother and Child* do not necessarily “confound legibility” or completely “escape control of reason,” they do challenge a strictly logical interpretation. Evoking a sense of enigma with their closed eyes, Picabia’s mother and child open up space for interpretation. Have these figures closed their eyes only for a moment, perhaps to hear something inaudible to the viewer, or have they closed their eyes for a final time? Are their faces deceptive masks that are hiding something from the viewer? Are these figures meant to be living beings capable of thought and speech or are they merely empty human frames?70 The setting in which they are standing only reinforces such questions. The deep, dark doorway to their right (reminiscent of the inset shadowed archways masking the bodies of de Chirico’s mannequins) underscores a sense of emptiness and mystery with its imposing and obscuring shadows.

Though representations of mothers often depict closed or downcast eyes, the mystery and absence in Picabia’s *Mother and Child* set his figures apart from more typical mother and child figures. In Picasso’s *Mother and Child* (1921) and Henri Lebasque’s *L’Emprunt de la Paix* (1920), for example, the mothers’ eyes are so downcast that they appear closed or nearly so (figs. 1.30 and 1.18). In Roger de la Fresnaye’s only drawing of a mother figure, *Mother and Child*


69 Anne Umland and Cathérine Hug, *Francis Picabia : Our Heads are Round so Our Thoughts can Change Direction* (New York: MoMA, 2016), 19.

70 L. Essif brings out these qualities of the mask in terms of hypersubjective, empty theatrical figures in: *Empty Figure*, 170.
(1923), not only are the mother’s eyes downcast but they are also, like those of Picabia’s figures, heavily shaded, as are her cheeks, chin, and neck (fig. 3.9). In each of these images, though, the position of the child in its mother’s arms explains the lidded eyes and, rather than emphasizing an inward gaze, insists that the mother is looking at her offspring. Moreover, in de la Fresnaye’s drawing, a stark highlight coming from the upper left corner of the image accounts for the heavy shadows and the overall lightness of the image dispels any sense of mystery. Missing from Picabia’s much darker composition, by contrast, are any details that might account for the mother’s downcast eyes: though her child is below her and off to her left, her eyelids are cast straight down. The extreme highlighting on her eyelids further encourages viewers to see her eyes as fully, rather than partially closed. Finally, unlike the light background of de la Fresnaye’s drawing, the deep shadow behind Picabia’s figures intensifies the sense that this mother’s attention is not, in fact, focused on anything external.

A sense of absence is further created in the resonance between Picabia’s figures and popular images of death masks. Though the history of such masks reaches back centuries, as Hans Belting points out, a “new cult of the death mask arose after World War I,” and was widely popularized through collections of photographic images published in book form.71 Perhaps most influential was the 1926 publication of Ernst Benkard’s Undying Faces, a collection of photographs of over a hundred death masks from the Renaissance to the First World War and including, among others, Wagner, Nietzsche, and Beethoven. Though first published in German, this book quickly became an international phenomenon translated into a range of languages and

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reprinted multiple times to keep up with high popular demand.\textsuperscript{72} It quickly found its way into the hands of influential French writers and artists like surrealists André Breton and Paul Éluard, who were so taken by the idea of these masks that they had their own likenesses made before their deaths.\textsuperscript{73} In addition, during the 1930s, a renewed interest in \textit{l’Inconnue de la Seine} swept Paris. This death mask had initially been popular in the last decades of the nineteenth century when first taken from the face of a girl who had supposedly plunged to her death in the city’s river (fig. 3.10).\textsuperscript{74} Within this context, as part of a wider culture of remembrance, the idea of these masks not only worked against the frightening anonymity of death, but also gave the impression of endowing it with “a meaning transcending its historical circumstances.”\textsuperscript{75}

Conceptually, these visual emblems play with, and perhaps even redefine, the line between life and death, and, because they evoke thoughts of such masks, so do Picabia’s figures. Significantly, a death mask, unlike other forms of sculptural representation, is made from an impression taken directly from the subject’s face.\textsuperscript{76} This means that, unlike any other mask, it is an indexical object, retaining a physical connection to a source, a trace of the features from


\textsuperscript{74} Many sources completely ignore the eeriness of the death mask and instead observe how this face captures the innocence, beauty, and peace of death. The mystery surrounding this unknown woman also prompted a consideration of the nature of the death mask. One commentator wrote of the mask, “It is not a woman, it is absence.” For an overview of this face’s history and for this quote see: Hélène Pinet, “L’eau, la femme, la mort: Le mythe de l’Inconnue de la Seine,” in \textit{Le Dernier Portrait}, ed. by Emmanuelle Hérân (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 2002), 175-191.


\textsuperscript{76} Indeed, some stories exist of impression-takers actually rolling the deceased’s face directly into hot wax, something that could never have been done with a live model. See: Sandberg, \textit{Living Pictures, Missing Persons}, 48.
which it took an impression.\textsuperscript{77} In some ways, this proximity to a dead body heightens the “horror effect” of the macabre, as it becomes clear that for this representation to exist a living being had to die.\textsuperscript{78} As Marcia Pointon observes, it also transforms the death mask into \textit{liminal} object, occupying a place at the boundary of life and death as it “record[s] the immobilized features of someone who is either already dead or who will die.”\textsuperscript{79} In either case, it is always connected to the separation of life and death. Moreover, unlike sculptures, these masks are “both closer (an imprint) and more distant from the subject, who is at the moment of representation in an important sense no longer there.”\textsuperscript{80} In this sense, the death mask is, in the words of Ronald L. Grimes, “at once a living-dead thing and a dead-living being.”\textsuperscript{81} Indeed, in 1926 Benkard wrote in his book of photographs that the death mask was a “boundary” that separated the two “mysteries” of life and death.\textsuperscript{82} Similarly, the Surrealists perceived the mask to be an object that “enable[d] the contingent self to transcend its limits, both the temporal limits imposed by death and the limits imposed by individuality itself.”\textsuperscript{83} In each of these conceptions, then, death masks place life and death side-by-side in an uneasy relationship that asks viewers to consider these two

\textsuperscript{77} The idea of the indexical death mask comes from: Ibid., 47-58.

\textsuperscript{78} Except, of course, in the case of the Surrealists, though they hoped to capitalize on the macabre in their representations as well. See: Lyford, \textit{Surrealist Masculinities}. For the idea of the horror effect and the macabre see: Sandberg, \textit{Living Pictures, Missing Persons.}, 23, 58.


\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{82} For a discussion of this see: Ibid.

\textsuperscript{83} Stubbs, “Surrealism and the Death Mask,” 71.
separate states of being simultaneously. As they resonate with such objects, the mother and child of Picabia’s painting similarly emphasize the conjunction of life and death.

At the same time, both death masks and Picabia’s figures assert a sense of absence, of a void. The death mask effects an ultimate separation from both the deceased subject and the living viewer. After the initial contact of skin to impression, the subject’s face becomes inaccessible forever (in a tomb, on a funeral pyre, etc.). Because of this, writes Belting, a “violent break” occurs between subject and mask as the death mask “separate[s] itself from the face of a human being, never to return to that person again.”84 This separation in turn brings out the uncanny in the mask: though it is a sculptural form that we would otherwise see as familiar (a representation of someone’s face), there is something missing, something eerie about it (its lifelessness).85 For Grimes, who further elaborates on the uncanniness of this object, a mask is “a dead thing impersonating an effective being.” Though lifeless, it “threatens to attain a life of its own,” a life that would be terrifying in its resounding emptiness.86 As an uncannily dead thing, or at least the supposed final representation of someone’s final face, the mask also creates a break between subject and viewer. Unable to breach the divide between life and death, the viewer can never reach the subject whose closed eyes seem to serve as a reminder of this separation.

84 Belting, *Face and Mask*, 77. The idea of “violent break” he quotes from Durs Grünbein.

85 Belting, *Face and Mask*, 77. While many sources on death masks and mannequins insist that these figures form the core of Freud’s theory of the uncanny, for Freud, it was not particular to these objects in and of themselves but rather found in any object that is “secretly familiar, [but] which has undergone repression and returned from it.” Still, he does write that “many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead and to spirits and ghosts.” See: James Strachey, ed., trans. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson, Vol. XVII (1918-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other works, (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1971), 241, 245.

This lack of palpable human presence and division between subject and viewer are similarly felt in Picabia’s *Mother and Child*. Though they stand, his figures’ eyes are closed, removing them from possible connection to the viewer and seeming to impede movement. Though their forms are present on the canvas and indeed stand in a way that suggests some sort of life, as representations neither subject is indeed living. Moreover, in their connection to death masks, they seem capable of evoking a presence that “can only emerge through the absence of that which it represents.”

Perhaps Picabia’s subjects, like the subjects of death masks, are not simply absent from the representation, but are or will soon be absent in a much more permanent manner.

Their closed eyes in particular suggest a further separation between living viewer and lifeless subject, as they, like the closed eyes of a death mask, draw out an eerie sense of blindness and emptiness. Considering the closed eyes of the death mask, Jean-Luc Nancy sees blind eyes and “empty sockets” as having the ability to “look without seeing or see without looking.”

Rather than returning the gaze of the viewer, they focus on something interior and, as Jeremy Stubbs explains, “evoke a certain inwardness of the dead person, creating for the spectator the illusion that the deceased now somehow communes with their own essence.” In a death mask, then, closed eyes act as a “sign of the human psyche which seems to hover, revealed and concealed, behind both work and mask.” But if the subjects are dead, then their essence and psyche are, in fact, gone.

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87 Belting, *Face and Mask*, 78, emphasis mine.

88 Nancy, “Masked Imagination,” 93, 95.

89 Stubbs, “Surrealism and the Death Mask,” 75.

90 Ibid., 76.
Whether dead or alive, Picabia’s figures also suggest a psyche that hovers mysteriously behind their still faces and closed eyes. Seeming to turn inward, rather than outward, these figures seem capable of communing with something inaccessible to the viewer. Once again, however, the emptiness suggested by the background acts as a telling indicator of what likely resides in these figures’ minds. Moreover, as they hover between life and death, presence and absence, these figures, like those of de Chirico and de Lempicka, resist firm interpretation as they bring together elements (motherhood and loss of life) often considered mutually exclusive. At the same time, as they inhabit an inaccessible world that seems cut off from logical thought, Picabia’s mother and child suggest a connection to a realm beyond comprehensible meaning, a realm of empty space.

In addition to this more metaphysical void, as with de Lempicka’s painting, this work also engages a cultural dimension that further plays on this mother and child’s connection to absence and loss. Painted between 1939 and 1940, these figures participated in a culture that not only feared the advent of “the next war” but then witnessed its arrival. According to Panchasi and Omer Bartov, the interwar period was defined in part by anticipation of future fighting.91 Beginning with representations of the terrifying power of new military technology during World War I, cultural representations worked through anxieties about extreme violence as well as the present and future vulnerability of French citizens. Though, as Silver has shown, the most popular French war art “tended to dispense with the bloody reality or grotesque consequences of battle in favor of a neutralized sign for stoic persistence,” a much larger visual culture that included graphic or suggestive news imagery kept the horrors of war alive in the public

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imagination. José Simont’s front-page news engraving of the aftermath of a German zeppelin raid on Paris, for example, not only foregrounded destruction and violence, but also emphasized the civilian deaths of a mother and two children (fig. 3.11). By focusing on these figures, this image suggests that the loss of these innocent civilians is the most extreme tragedy of war. Continuing after the armistice, as Bartov explains, images of “meaningless, horrible death, boundless, inexplicable suffering, inarticulate rage, madness, and violence” appeared in “innumerable forms,” often focusing on the loss of women and children. Such imagery fueled fears of future wars that were expected to be even more violent and even more deadly to the French population than the Great War, heightening the fear of loss (of innocence, of population numbers, of national strength).

Like Picabia’s mother and child, however, wartime imagery did not have a clear, cohesive meaning and was often full of contradictions. According to Bartov, “the confusion over a predominant image was in itself the reflection of, as well as the cause for, the general climate of uncertainty and bewilderment.” At a time that was defined by “fresh cemeteries on the one hand and by growing armament production on the other,” it was difficult to create one specific, unifying representation of war and its aftermath. Instead, writes Bartov, “baffling paradoxes, painful ironies, confusing overlaps and jarring contradictions” came to the fore. Perhaps tapping into the confusion of a wider body of wartime imagery, Picabia’s mother and child do

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94 Ibid., 59.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 62.
not present the viewer with one overarching message. Instead, the lidded eyes, sallow skin, and prevalent shadows leave room for vague and changeable interpretations. What is more, by depicting mother and child, figures most often associated with abundance and life, standing with their eyes closed in a mysterious setting, Picabia here produces a confusion of symbols, a sort of “jarring contradiction” or “painful irony.”

A majority of interwar art and popular culture attempted to contradict such fear and confusion with representations of mothers and children as icons of hope and life. In reality, women and children were actually vulnerable to new weapons and attack strategies. New developments in military technology, especially air power, put all civilians at much greater risk of attack, no matter their distance from the front lines. As Susan R. Grayzel explains, in this climate “women no longer experienced war merely through damage done to other bodies.” Instead, she writes, theirs was a much more direct experience as “wartime technology now brought war home…well beyond the battle lines.”

Thus, while women did still hold a “relational position” to war as mothers of soldiers, they were now also “mothers under fire.” Indeed, in addition to 1,310,000 French soldiers, two hundred thousand civilians lost their lives during the First World War.

Such high death tolls both on the front lines and on the home front changed the way that people understood war and its risks. Rather than a more isolated threat to male soldiers on the front, the technology of war, in extreme conceptions, posed a threat to all of society. Aerial


98 Ibid., 140-1.

attacks could not only wipe out entire populations but also destroy the cities, the entire landscape of France. An image in the feminist newspaper *La Française* from September 10, 1932, captures this new understanding (fig. 1.36). Under the words “For the disarmament of nations” a mother’s and child’s face turn upward. The mother looks up in terror, her open mouth indicating a desperate cry. The child, also with an open mouth, seems inconsolably upset. Above them looms a missile. It is framed by a large black triangular background that emphasizes its trajectory toward the terrified pair. The faint and small silhouettes of five fighter planes give further context to the scene. Placed in front of an image of a globe, this mother and child stand in for mother and children around the world—all of whom were thought to be in grave danger of aerial attacks. The blank and abstracted triangle that the bombs appear to carry with them emphasizes the sense that total annihilation could occur—after the attack a wide, an empty darkness could be all that remains.

Within this cultural context of fear, pronatalist sentiments spread widely, and the mother (and her children) became the icon of continued hope and life. Military strategists, politicians, and civilians alike believed that a regeneration of the French race was a defensive imperative and could indeed save the French nation from total annihilation in “the next war.” As Panchasi explains, bodies “were essential to the nation and the ‘next war’ would not be possible without them.”¹⁰⁰ Not only was a larger population more likely to survive future violence but more children also meant more soldiers. Many sources took up the pronatalist insistence that the nation needed more citizens. In January 1923, for example, an article entitled “La diversión Malthusienne” in *La Revue de la Plus Grande Famille* expressed the hope that France would be able to meet future “invaders” in the “next war” with “a new wall of flesh and blood.” Sixteen

¹⁰⁰ Panchasi, *Future Tense*, 104.
years later, in a pamphlet circulated in March 1939, the Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation similarly aligned the perceived necessity of manpower and the defense of the nation.101 “If the defense of the border [with Germany] were equally divided among all families,” the main caption reads, “here is how France would be defended.” The sections of the country with the greatest number of large families (three or more children) are, of course, shown as the most fortified. Even an editorial in the feminist newspaper *La Française* insisted in 1937 that “putting an end to depopulation is indisputably a question of life or death for France.”102 Indeed, as Geoff Read explains, the Radicals, Socialists, and Communists shared the Parti Populaire’s pronatalist sentiment and fears of a future of a weakened race.103

As icons of regeneration, mothers were placed at the heart of France’s future, and, as more traditional representations of motherhood insist, their maternal duty not only sustained life but gave life. Because a majority of sources agreed that motherhood was nature’s intended role for women, they also insisted that nature bestowed upon them the means to nourish and support their children even beyond infancy. An advertisement for the powdered milk drink Elesca, for example, takes up these ideals by emphasizing woman’s natural place as mother and sustainer to her children (fig. 3.12).104 Placed amidst glamor shots and drawings of modern, independent, and sexualized women in women’s magazines popular in the 1930s, this advertisement appeared in

101 Illustrated in Ibid., 106. For a more detailed discussion of this image and its import see Panchasi’s discussion, 105-7.

102 “Politique de natalité,” *La Française*, March 13, 1937. Though they insist that women have the right to choose whether or not to become mothers and whether they wish to only have one child, this newspaper still hopes that people will continue to regenerate and keep France from “dying.”

103 Read also discusses the idea of the French “race,” and, particularly in the 1930s, how this notion is bound up with eugenics. For more on this see Chapter 1.

104 This particular iteration of this image appears in the December 11, 1939 issue of the women’s magazine *Eve*. 
contexts that, much like de Lempicka’s painting during the decade before, blurred boundaries between modern women and mothers. Unlike de Lempicka’s Maternity, the advertisement appeals to the ideal of a traditional family.105 As in Picabia’s painting, the black and white advertisement has a limited color palette and two of the figures even have downcast eyes that could appear closed. But here, the details of the image not only insist that the figures’ eyes are not closed, but looking toward plentiful food and drink, they also closely link the mother with the abundance of nature. The mother’s flowered top or dress, her pearls, her three children, and the cup she holds just in front of her breast all emphasize this theme. Her clothing and accessories remind the viewer that motherhood is woman’s natural role. Her numerous children position her as a regenerator of the race. The link between her breast and the cup of Elesca powdered milk in her hand insist that though her children have outgrown breastfeeding, this mother is still able to provide them with ample nourishment. “Me too, mom!” the caption reads. “I’m very hungry!” But here their hunger is an emptiness the mother can happily fill.

Compared to such typical and prevalent conservative images of mothers and their children, Picabia’s mother seems totally foreign. Where the advertisement blatantly stresses the “natural” aspects of motherhood, Picabia creates an absence of any overt connections to nature, abundance, or sustenance. Though his maternal figure clasps her child’s hand and though their bodies overlap, her breasts are de-emphasized and she has no alternative sustenance to offer her older child. Where the mother’s clothing in the advertisement is covered in flowers and her neck is adorned in two strands of pearls, in Picabia’s painting, the mother is dressed in a stark, straight

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105 The cover of this issue, for example, is a photograph of stage and screen star Yvonne Printemps in “Three Waltzes.” She wears heavy make-up (thick eyeliner, pronounced rouge, and ruby red lipstick) and her hair is styled in long, blonde ringlets. Her costume is a tight-fitting and presumably short bustier dress with ruffled “sleeves” that hang down off her shoulder. In her hand, between two fingers with painted red nails, she holds a cigarette in a holder. Though a red ring adorns her left ring finger and hints at the possibility that this is a married woman, in her revealing outfit, with her heavy make-up and cigarette, Printemps typifies the sexualized modern woman.
blue dress. Moreover, rather than a nature scene or landscape, his figures stand in front of the cold stone portal. The absence of familiar tropes creates a sense of emptiness in *Mother and Child*.

By destabilizing ties between maternity and life, Picabia, like de Chirico, problematizes the assumptions and generalizations on which the very meaning of motherhood stood. If his image places this mother and child on the boundary of life and death, it also places cultural constructions of meaning in a precarious position. In Picabia’s painting, the mother is not a secure or permanent figure. Though she has produced a child, her androgynous offspring is too young to take up an active role in the Republic: too young to fight in the war, if male, too young to have more babies, if female. Instead Picabia’s figures push back against images that associate motherhood with sun-drenched fields or bountiful baskets of fruit. With their eyes shut and gazes turned inward, mother and child may not be conscious of any (approaching) danger. They also refuse any engagement with viewers, neither reassuring them of their security, nor crying out for help. They are simply closed off. The dark doorway that looms behind them further emphasizes an air of mystery and detachment. If these are vulnerable figures, is the dark doorway representative of death, a chilling sleep? Could something that ominous hold the promise of aid or hope? If Picabia’s figures are not already lifeless, the absence of any sustenance, abundance, or hope in the image seems to sentence them to imminent death. Certainly, as war again erupted in Europe, despite the many interwar efforts to increase population sizes, rebuild cities and towns, and otherwise prevent further hostilities, the idealized mother figure of reconstruction was again put in danger. An innocent victim of modern warfare, she was vulnerable and powerless.

On Picabia’s canvas the life-giving power of the mother is replaced by her power to break down the divide between life and death, conscious and unconscious, logic and enigma.
Holding life and death in equal suspension, the emptiness of these figures challenges viewers’ knowledge and beliefs about these two mysterious states of being. This unravelling of logic in turn unravels the idea of an ultimate truth or uncontestable knowledge. It instead reinserts possibility, contingency, and the unknown. Once again, like de Chirico and de Lempicka before him, Picabia undoes traditional associations with the mother figure and substitutes mystery for clarity, absence for presence, loss for abundance.

Conclusion

Exploring different metaphysical and cultural facets of emptiness, de Chirico’s The Painter’s Family, de Lempicka’s Maternity, and Picabia’s Mother and Child challenged popular representations of the mother figure established in paintings like Picasso’s Maternity, montages like For the Disarmament of nations, and monuments like the Monument to French Mothers. In de Chirico’s The Painter’s Family, mannequin-like figures with large, featureless heads, missing limbs, and architectural forms springing from their torsos deny any logical understanding of this family’s function and suggest the metaphysical void of truth and fixed meaning. In de Lempicka’s Maternity, the mother’s similarities to the metallic, empty mannequins of Parisian shop windows link her to the vacant femme moderne and destabilize the supposed dichotomy of flapper and mother. In Picabia’s Mother and Child, closed eyes and eerie shadows give the impression that these figures wear a final mask of death, which in turn pushes against the pervasive and iconic regenerative mother trope as it asks viewers to hold life and death in equal suspension.

In all three images, though distinct in their challenge to interwar culture, the artists resist clear, easily accessible messages of hope, life, abundance, and love and instead present viewers
with enigma. Motherhood becomes a site of death, confusion, uncontrolable desire, and vulnerability as well as absence, vacancy, and loss. By challenging common tropes and ideals of motherhood, each of these artists points to the fabrication of such concepts while simultaneously complicating and contradicting their truths. Pointing to realms beyond human cognition, de Chirico, de Lempicka, and Picabia evoke the metaphysical. At the same time, de Lempicka and Picabia draw out cultural dimensions of loss experienced during and after World War I: the loss of prewar culture and tradition, the loss of life, the loss of a firm grasp on reality. Together, though in different ways, these representations reveal that the meaning behind representations of motherhood was mutable, malleable, and subjective. It could be changed or even forgotten. At their core, these artists seem to say, ideals and conventions can be just as devoid of clear meaning as the figures on these canvases.
CHAPTER 4
Surrogacy: Substitution as Possibility

In the aftermath of World War I, as France attempted to come to terms with the great losses of the war and artists like Giorgio de Chirico, Tamara de Lempicka, and Francis Picabia explored the unraveling of the iconic mother, the figure of the single woman came into the spotlight. A figure who “provided an opportunity to discuss perceived changes in all women’s lives,” the femme seule was “positioned on the horizon of changing gender identities” and, in this capacity, took on a range of different guises during the interwar period. As a modern, independent woman with her masculine vices and a penchant for cropped hair, short skirts, and work outside the home, the femme seule served as a threat to conservative norms and a feminist dream of independence and possibility. At the same time, as a figure “forced” into celibacy by a dearth of eligible bachelors and “forced” to fill the jobs left open by the war dead and disabled veterans, the single woman also represented the losses and changes brought by the war. While feminists used this female figure to promote a sense of possibility, then, during the interwar period certain pronatalists attempted to transform the femme seule into a conservative figure, a sympathetic female type that could complement, rather than contrast or destabilize, ideals of the

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1 Roberts, Civilization without Sexes, 159.

2 It is important to note here, however, that according to Christine Bard a majority of feminists did not embrace the highly controversial figure of the garçonne. This modern woman, initially created by Victor Margueritte, broke with tradition in extreme ways that feminists worried would scare off possible supporters and ultimately hurt their cause. Those feminists and feminist groups that rejected the figure of the sexually-liberated garçonne instead felt that slow, less shocking changes would be the way forward and instead embraced the figure of the good wife and mother. See, Bard, Filles de Marianne, 207-9.
heroic mother. Rewriting the tradition of the *vieille fille*, who could never reach full womanhood without a husband to care for and children to mother, pronatalists proposed “alternative” and “substitute” maternities for those women obligated to live a single life.³ They highlighted appropriate occupations for the modern unwed woman that could fulfill her maternal nature, from work as a nurse or teacher to social work and charity.⁴ In this way, conservative commentators were able to cast the single woman’s life choices, including her career, as centered on the natural feminine instinct of self-sacrificing care of others. Thus, as French men and women wrestled with the possibility of woman’s existence outside of traditional domesticity, substitute or surrogate motherhood helped to navigate anxieties about the sexualized, egocentric single woman and reinforce the supposed reality of all women’s maternal instincts.

In the midst of this, three artists, Fernand Léger, Suzanne Valadon, and Marie Laurencin, explored variations on themes of surrogacy and brought maternal care to a contemporary context. As seen in previous chapters of this study, artists like Picasso and Severini used the mother figure to signal their interest in looking back to a classical art-historical past for inspiration. Considered an active participant in this return to order, Fernand Léger similarly looked for inspiration in the past. But he did so in his own way by attempting to reconcile tradition and modernity. Such an artistic synthesis of past and present resulted in a modern approach to the mother figure. In two of his works, *Femmes dans un Intérieur* (1921) and *Personnages dans un*...


⁴ Indeed, they went so far in promoting the maternal instinct in all forms that certain sources even embraced the long-scandalous *fille mère*, or single, and often young, mother. *Le Matin*, for example, ran a series of front-page articles defending motherhood “of all kinds,” including single motherhood. Of course, not all pronatalists embraced this scandalous figure and, even though sympathy for this figure did increase during the interwar period, for the most part, writes Françoise Thébaud, “the *filles-mères* remained deviant mothers that needed to be either rescued or redeemed.” Thébaud, *Quand nos grand-mères donnaient la vie: La maternité en France dans l’entre-deux-guerres* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1986), 222.
Jardin (1922), Léger seems to have even left open the possibility of alternative motherhoods. In Femmes dans un Intérieur (1921), for example, three female nudes and a clothed mother and child pair come together in one composition. Though in some ways this image seems to show a conventional dichotomy of two female types, as the mother and nudes interact traditional binaries begin to break down. An abstracted cubist-like system of representation confuses the hands and arms of the many adult female figures, making it unclear which of the female figures is the child’s mother and instead allowing multiple women the possibility of a maternal role. In Personnages dans un Jardin, by contrast, there is no dichotomy of clothed and unclothed. But a family group with an adult female in place of a father figure complicates the traditional family dynamic. Thus, much like the pronatalist commentators who urged their compatriots to accept “all forms of motherhood,” Léger seems to have opened up space for an exploration of something different.

Further defying expectations and disrupting traditional norms of fulfilling and happy biological motherhood, Marie Laurencin and Suzanne Valadon also, though perhaps more intentionally, created images that play with themes of alternative or surrogate motherhood. In images such as Valadon’s Young Girl with Cat (1919) and Louison and Raminou (1920) and Laurencin’s Portrait of Coco Chanel (1923) and Self Portrait with Cat (ca. 1912) cats and dogs occupy the spaces generally reserved for babies. Though pets have a long history in painting, especially portraiture, in the context of the interwar period, when the icon of the biological, bourgeois mother represented a postwar return to normalcy, the animals on these canvases push beyond conservative norms in new and potentially volatile ways. As surrogate mothers, the female figures on these canvases acknowledge the importance of the mothering instinct in a range of women, but they simultaneously play with the distinction between fulfilled mothers and
independent modern women as they engage questions of femininity and push the boundaries of female existence. Through their images of surrogacy, then, Valadon and Laurencin renegotiate the artistic and cultural ideals of motherhood. Rather than pointing to the lack of truth or meaning in representations of maternal figures, these artists introduce contemporary questions of female independence, sexuality, and possibility through substitution.

Cultural Representations of Single and Surrogate Mothers in Interwar France

Widespread consideration of the femme seule from both sides of the political spectrum brought alternative choices into the limelight despite widespread conservatism regarding French motherhood. At a time when repopulation was cast as the key to France’s postwar recovery, a fear of a vast disparity between numbers of French men and women coexisted with the image of the selfish, non-maternal single woman and exacerbated concerns that France would be unable to recover its strength. Though the postwar gender ratios were not as skewed as figures like conservative demographer Michel Huber would have it (he estimated that in 1921 eligible women outnumbered their male counterparts by a ratio of six to four), the fear of a disproportionate number of men and women was very real.5 Indeed, in the aftermath of such a deadly war, women did have more difficulty finding eligible French bachelors with whom to

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5 Huber is quoted in Roberts, Civilization without Sexes, 154. Many historians have attested to the perception of threat during this time period but they simultaneously counter these fears with evidence that such anxiety was unfounded. For example, Roberts explains that despite fears and perceptions that the war had drastically increased the disproportion between the sexes, women had always outnumbered men in French society and that, in the end, the number of single women after the war did not increase as much as expected. This was in part because many women married foreigners, numbers of others married younger men, and more male widowers and divorcés remarried during the interwar period than before. Indeed, Thébaud argues that it was not the demographics that caused a difficulty in finding mates. Instead, she writes, “women workers in some tertiary professions found it difficult to marry...because of the virtual impossibility of finding a suitable partner. As one of the most radical French feminists, Madeleine Pelletier, explained in the 1920s, these young women refused to come down in the world by marrying a worker, while the men of their social background preferred women with better dowries, who stayed at home.” See: Thébaud, “Work, Gender, and Identity in Peace and War: France, 1890-1930,” in Borderlines: Genders and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930, ed. Billie Melman (New York: Routledge, 1998), 414.
settle down and produce the desired *familles nombreuses*. At the same time, sources from soldiers’ accounts to pronatalist propaganda insisted that the egocentrism that had plagued France before the war had only increased between 1914 and 1919. Too much time left alone at home had supposedly increased the tendency of women to embrace a self-centered way of life and refuse their natural, moral duty of motherhood. Soldiers frequently placed their wartime experience of “hardship, suffering, [and] sacrifice” in contrast with the “moral degeneracy, luxury, [and] selfishness” that they claimed women had lived out. “Alone, left to their own devices, obligated to replace the absent men,” wrote Paul Reboux in a front-page article in *l’Œuvre* on the dangers of the new bobbed haircut, “they grew accustomed to…cigarettes…sport…[and] virile jobs.” Asserting a similar narrative, many veterans and pronatalist commentators alike insisted that war had changed the gendered landscape of France as, in its wake, women were newly interested in seeking the pleasures of the “masculine” vices

6 A variety of articles published during this period attest to the difficulty of finding mates in the interwar period. For example, in “Puisqu’il y a en France un excédent de deux millions de femmes pourquoi ne pas importer des maris?” Paul Carnot insists that the “more than 2 million women” in France surely merits importing husbands (specifically, husbands from Canada, since they already speak French!) *Le Matin*, July 29, 1920. In “Faut-il importer des maris?” Suzanne de Callias details a more official proposal to import American husbands from California (which was quickly dismissed by the minister of foreign affairs), *La Française*, February 19, 1921. And in “Parlons Mariage,” editor of *La Française*, Jane Misme, takes a different approach asking “What can our journal do to give marriageable men and women more opportunities to meet?” September 30, 1922. Some even went so far as to declare a need for polygamy to combat these difficulties. See: Georges Anquetil, *La maîtresse légitime: essai sur le mariage polygamique de demain* (Paris: Les éditions Georges-Anquetil, 1923).

7 Before the war, feminists especially were thought to pursue selfish desires (as compared to the “selflessness” of motherhood). This is why, especially in the interwar years, the majority of feminists embraced motherhood and promoted their maternal duties and joys. In her “Woman and the Civil Code,” from the *Conseil national des femmes françaises*, Mme d’Abbadie d’Arrast, for example, insists that feminists “are much more interested in fulfilling our duty as mothers, daughters, and wives, than in the vain satisfaction of a few egotistical successes.” Mme d’Abbadie d’Arrast, “La Femme et le Code Civil,” *Conseil national des femmes françaises* (January 29, 1905). 43. “Although natalists had characterized the French woman as egoistic and pleasure-seeking since the previous century,” Roberts observes, “the gendered geography of the war strongly reinforced their views.” See: *Civilization without Sexes*, 128

8 Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, 128. Along with pronatalist claims to the same end, these popular perspectives “formed an important strand of wartime and postwar views of women,” despite the fact that, as Roberts argues, most women defined independence as “breaking free of their subordination to men while still building a home and family,” 139, emphasis mine.

they had first discovered in the men’s absence. Thus in a context of supposedly skewed gender ratios and new-found feminine independence and vice, the figure of the *femme seule* came to represent fears that women would be unable or unwilling to become mothers who could help to rebuild the devastation of the war.

Adding to the impression that traditional families were becoming a rarity, conservative as well as certain feminist commentators stressed a newfound feminine independence. Playing on fears of change and decay, for example, certain sources insisted that French citizens had become too selfish to embrace family life. “In our age of frivolity,” lamented politician Raoul Brandon, “the frenzy of pleasure and selfish enjoyment seem to form the supreme goal of life” and family life and children “a pain, an intrusion, a killjoy.” For women, this selfishness supposedly played out in a defiance of the biological and social order of society (“birth, growth, marriage, procreation, and death”). Thus, the single woman represented nonconformity, a “disruption of time and space” and a “refusal to take orders.”

Indeed, after the war this nonconformity supposedly increased to the point that women’s refusal to marry (or to stay married) threw the institution of marriage itself into crisis.

Publications like lawyer Henry Bordeaux’s 1921 *Le Mariage, hier et aujourd’hui*, insisted that

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12 Arlette Farge and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Introduction to *Madame ou Mademoiselle? Itinéraires de la solitude feminine XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Montalba, 1984), 15. This text is a collection of essays that closely examine various aspects of the single woman, including the history of the “*vieille fille*,” medical discourses on single women, and various professions held by single women. See especially: pp. 207-232, 251-64, 97-110, and 117-62.
the war had created a rift in traditional relationships between men and women. Indeed for many commentators during the interwar period, Clémentine Vidal-Naquet explains, the “discovery of self…contributed to new social ideas, and was often evoked to explain the development of a marriage crisis.” In the context of Bordeaux’s explanation, the war was responsible for increasing individualism in France, as prolonged fighting forced men and women to grow accustomed to living without each other, while the wartime need for more independent women to join the workforce and run their households had supposedly shifted women’s perception of their self-worth. Suddenly women were valued as men’s replacements outside the home rather than in the traditional sense of homemaker and mother. One rather extreme commentary included in Bordeaux’s collection of letters and comments stresses the inextricable tie between a woman’s work and place in the home and her claims to femininity, insisting that after the war women no longer saw the value in “remaining women.” In this way, the independence and defiance that women supposedly learned during the war was cast as responsible for a lack of children as well as the downfall of the institution of marriage.

13 This book is a sampling of the “thousands” of letters Bordeaux received after the publication of his article “The Marriage Crisis” originally published in the newspaper L’Echo de Paris. Bordeaux, Le Mariage.


15 In his account, Bordeaux does not address the letters exchanged between soldiers and their loved ones on the home front. As Clémentine Vidal-Naquet explains, though letters were subject to certain codes and styles that kept them from being “faithful translation[s] of an interior reality,” they nonetheless offered a means through which to maintain relationships interrupted by the war and gave a semblance of continued frequent contact, despite the loss of day-to-day life together. See, Vidal-Naquet, Correspondances conjugale, 1914-1918, dans l’intimité de la grande guerre (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 2014), vii-xvi.

16 Quoted in Bordeaux, Le Mariage: Hier et Aujourd’hui, 18 and 56. (This gets at the burgeoning idea of a “third sex,” a concept popularized at the time in publications like: Edward Carpenter, The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Transitional Types of Men and Women (New York: AMS Press, 1908) and Havelock Ellis, Sexual Inversion (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company Publishers, 1901).)
Still, for certain feminists, women’s newfound independence represented positive change. Certain commentators saw a disappearance of the “old type” of single woman, who was either lost or embittered by the absence of a husband or children.\(^{17}\) In her stead, they perceived a new iteration of the *femme seule* who could “behave, support, protect and entertain herself like a man.”\(^{18}\) Often careful to separate this independent figure from the highly controversial *garçonne* whose rejection of tradition represented an extreme, feminists nonetheless lauded the possibility of a more autonomous feminine lifestyle.\(^{19}\) A minority of these women, like the famed extremist Madeleine Pelletier, even adopted a *chasteté féministe* (feminist chastity), refusing to compromise their morals by engaging in extramarital sex and refusing to marry and forfeit their political and social rights as individuals.\(^{20}\) Upholding the impression that the First World War had created a marked change in women’s behaviors and desires, the figure of the *femme seule* embodied independence and self-sufficiency, qualities that often exacerbated fears of the impossibility of recovery in the wake of World War I.

Within this context, though pronatalists so often perceived the single woman as a selfish threat to France’s future, certain conservative commentators also attempted to transform this figure into a potentially beneficial feminine type capable of complementing and even supporting the morals and ideals of the traditional mother. This first occurred, as Yvonne Knibiehler and Catherine Fouquet explain, during the war when high numbers of wounded soldiers required an

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\(^{17}\) This can in part be seen in changing vocabulary. Suddenly, instead of diminutive terms like *vieille fille*, “old girl,” new language like *dame célibataire*, “bachelorette,” and *femme seule*, “single woman,” came into popular use. Unlike earlier terms for unmarried women, these new labels suggested that female adulthood was no longer equated with marriage. For more, see Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, 157.


\(^{20}\) Bard examines the phenomenon of feminist chastity at length, Ibid., 219-23.
influx of female nurses to attend their medical needs.\textsuperscript{21} In 1915, a front-page article in \textit{le Gaulois}, for example, lauded the often unwed women who had entered the nursing profession, equating their work with motherhood. Author Emile Faguet praised nurses for their faithfulness to their vocation as women to “give life” and for finding “new ways to be mothers” by “invent[ing] new maternities.”\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, work as a nurse, like Boucicaut’s and de Hirsch’s dedication to appropriate social outlets, was in pre- and post-war narratives an acceptable alternative to the role of biological motherhood, an outlet for frustrated maternal instincts and a suitable career for those women who could not find husbands. In 1920, for example, journalist Berthe Benage in \textit{Le Journal des demoiselles} dubbed such work “social motherhood” and defined it as an alternative that would keep single women from “withdraw[ing] from active life and languish[ing] in an egoistic neurasthenia.”\textsuperscript{23} In other words, such professions and occupations, all of which fell under the new category of “substitute” or “social” motherhood, continued to uphold the notion of a universal maternal instinct and provided an antidote to the selfishness and materialism of the modern woman.

In more extreme narratives, certain commentators even emphasized the hope that the single woman could become the single mother. Treating the subject carefully so as to avoid a display of the contradictory moral nature of this proposition, a small portion of pronatalists attempted to override the historical view of the unwed mother as morally degenerate with the

\textsuperscript{21} Knibiehler and Fouquet, \textit{L’Histoire des Mères}, 302.

\textsuperscript{22} Emile Faguet, “Les Femmes pendant la guerre,” \textit{le Gaulois} (June 4, 1915), 1. Interestingly, the article ends with a call for a postwar “monument” to mothers: “On the day of triumph, it would be suitable to build a monument to these women, not an elaborate or colossal structure, but, in our pious hearts, a monument [declaring]… ‘To the mothers of Our Country, the country that recognizes [their efforts]!’” (“Au jour du triomphe, il conviendra de lui élever, non pas fastueusement et colossalement, mais dans nos cœurs peix, un monument où nous lirons des veux de l’âme: ‘Aux mères de la Patrie, la Patrie reconnaissante!’”)

potential benefits she represented for society.\textsuperscript{24} Newspaper articles like \textit{Le Matin’s} front-page “Let’s Honor and Protect all Mothers” of August 22, 1925 soon took up this stance, promoting a medical and social view of unwed motherhood that called French citizens to “honor all forms of motherhood” as “respectable and sacred.”\textsuperscript{25} At a time when so many women supposedly wanted to live without bearing children, such sources insisted that women could only remain healthy in body and mind if they bore children “whatever the origin.”\textsuperscript{26} By casting the single mother in an honorable light and even as a necessity, such sources attempted to overshadow the problematic extramarital encounters that unwed motherhood entailed by insisting on the benefits of any and all motherhood at a time when so few women could supposedly hope to marry.

In the interwar period, then, when single women could no longer be ignored or omitted from public discussions, the “woman on her own” thus became a “compromise figure that enabled the debate on gender to advance within French society and allowed change to seep gradually into women’s lives.”\textsuperscript{27} In her guise of modern woman, the \textit{femme seule} became a target of harsh criticism, as commentators expressed anxiety over her new vices like smoking and drinking as well as her sexuality and morality.\textsuperscript{28} But in her guise as an alternative sort of mother,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} According to Roberts, this often took the form of a desire to soften moral and legal sanctions against unwed women who had been abandoned by their partners. \textit{Civilization without Sexes}, 165.
\item \textsuperscript{25} It continues by “reminding” readers that not only is sterility against nature but that, according to popular medical findings, a woman cannot be healthy without becoming a mother. Adding to this, it insists that at that point 1,500,000 young girls will never marry. With this in mind, the article asks the reader to reconsider the unwed mother. “Let’s Honor and Protect all Mothers,” \textit{Le Matin’s} (August 22, 1925).
\item \textsuperscript{26} What is more, many doctors even began to campaign for state-funded support for planned single motherhood. According to their view, state-supported motherhood was medically necessary for the health of all women; if she did not bear children, a woman had increased risk of fibroids and premature aging.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Thébaud, “Work, Gender, and Identity,” 415.
\item \textsuperscript{28} These discussions, according to Susan R. Grayzel, acted as “an arena for the expression of anxiety about general social disorder.” \textit{Women’s Identities at War}, 122.
\end{itemize}
whether single or surrogate, the *femme seule* also represented new ways of achieving old goals. Perhaps, various commentators suggested, through surrogate maternities France could still reclaim tradition and equilibrium despite a culture and society transformed by the disruption and devastation of the war.

**Fernand Léger: Surrogacy and the Mixing of Modernity and Tradition**

Despite the complex discussion of alternative motherhoods in texts, mothers in interwar French art were generally fulfilled, biological, and often bourgeois women who were kept carefully distinct from their modern woman counterparts. Even before the war had ended, certain male avant-garde artists, like Gino Severini, Albert Gleizes, and Pablo Picasso, produced highly traditional representations of motherhood, as they returned to more conservative, idealized subjects and often representational (rather than abstracted) painting styles. A few years after his return to the home front, one such artist, Fernand Léger, also made a marked shift toward embracing this movement.²⁹ Throughout his career, Léger was committed to the abstractions and chaos of modernism (fig. 4.1).³⁰ Yet of the “several possible lines of development” he established in 1921, Léger “most ambitiously and most publicly” pursued classical subjects that ultimately inspired one of his most famous large-scale paintings, *Le Grand Déjeuner* (fig. 4.2).³¹ During this time, Léger worked on many canvases simultaneously, “moving back and forth

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among them, learning from each in a complicated way."\(^3\)

But in all, he worked toward a synthesis of a classicizing aesthetic, traditional subjects, and modernity.

In many of the paintings he completed during this time, Léger experimented with both mother and child compositions and images of female nudes (figs. 4.3 and 4.4). In one such painting, *Femmes dans un Intérieur* (1921) (fig. 4.5), he combines the mother and child with three monumentalized (and mechanized) nudes.\(^3\) In this work, a separation remains between the three unclothed and one clothed figure and thus, for many commentators and historians, upholds a sense of dichotomy, a sense that the mother still stands out among women. At the same time, however, the women in this image come together to function almost as a collective of mothers for one child and thus seem to draw out a sense of alternative possibilities. Completed the next year, *Personnages dans un Jardin* (1922) (fig. 4.7) is another of Léger’s experiments with the mother and child theme. Here, he omits the nude female form and instead presents two clothed adult women and one clothed child who is partially hidden by a yellow wall. Joined through touch and seemingly similar in age, the two adult women serve as the painting’s central focus and raise many questions. Much as with *Femmes dans un Intérieur*, it is impossible to discern who is related to the child or how. Similarly, the women’s relationship, while familiar and even intimate, is left undefined. Unlike *Femmes dans un Intérieur*, however, there is not an obvious separation between the female figures in *Personnages dans un Jardin*. Indeed, here it is as if more of a separation occurs between the women and the child than the women themselves. Still,

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\(^3\) Though it is possible that he combined these figures again in drawings or sketches, they do not occur together in others of his paintings. That said, however, he did play with the combination of clothed and unclothed female figures in a number of other paintings, including *Les Trois Femmes aux Fleurs* (1920), *Les Femmes au Bouquet* (1921), *Femme Tenant des Fleurs* (1922), *Le Corsage Rouge* (1922), and *Les Trois Femmes au Bouquet* (1922).
in both paintings Léger creates compositions that allude to themes of surrogacy or alternative motherhoods. The many women on his canvases, even the nudes, seem somehow connected to the children and somehow connected to the maternal. Read one way, it is as if Léger insists on the conservative belief that women are all maternal beings, as if maternity is in their nature. But read in light of the discussions surrounding the *femme seule*, these paintings evoke the possibility of motherhood outside the traditional boundaries of biology.

Considered an active participant in the return to order, Léger nonetheless developed his own approach to this trend. Around 1921 Léger turned away from the “fragmentation and ferment” of works like *The City* (fig. 4.1) and instead began to seek out “a calmer, more obviously ordered style that looked back to the art of the classical tradition.”\(^3^4\) Not only did he choose to focus on more figurative subject matter, but he also looked to past artists like Poussin, Ingres, and Renoir for inspiration. In choosing from their work the subject of the “decorous female nude posed for harmonious effect,” Léger, according to Christopher Green, singled out “the most decisively backward-looking classical subject of all.”\(^3^5\) At the same time, his work with mother figures in works like *La Mere et l’enfant (chien sous table)* (1920) (fig. 4.3) and *La Femme et l’enfant* (1922) (fig. 4.4) further associated him with a conservative artistic trend. But his look to tradition did not end with his choice of subject. Léger’s approach to his subjects also referenced art history—his “smooth tonal modelling…looks back to David,” and the “largeness and weightiness of [the nudes’] limbs…looks back to Poussin and classical antiquity.”\(^3^6\)


\(^3^5\) This subject, he writes, was “given such status by Ingres and Renoir” and was also “so much a part of Picasso’s call to order.” Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 223.

\(^3^6\) Ibid., 230, 237. Even Léger’s inspiration for the backgrounds and settings of these paintings becomes significant as, according to Green, it can be traced to paintings, tapestries, and illuminated books of the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in France and Netherlands.
addition, as Robert Herbert insists, the odd coloring and smooth, geometric shapes and curves that Léger uses to create his figures further underscore Léger’s ties to a classical past.\textsuperscript{37} Finally, as a part of a movement that stressed the harmonies and divisions of an idealized past, Léger’s works, which at this time rarely placed male and female figures together in one space, carefully upheld traditional gender divides.\textsuperscript{38} By thus turning to the past for inspiration, Léger asserted in paintings like \textit{Femmes dans un Intérieur} and \textit{Personnages dans un Jardin} a gendered society in which classical aesthetics continued to represent harmony and stability.

As much as he looked back into history for inspiration, Léger did not copy classical imagery, but rather, attempted to modernize tradition. Committed to the “contrast of forms” and the machine aesthetic, Léger kept a keen awareness of his contemporary culture as he created paintings in which modern life seemed ordered by the same precision and balance as the past. As Green explains, an interest in the Purist notion of “a developing, ordered \textit{esprit nouveau},” which called for artists to create “a new, ordered reality and new classical enthusiasms,” opened the way for Léger to “remain a modern realist with popular aspirations” even as he took inspiration from the past.\textsuperscript{39} Apparent in a careful balance of opposing elements, Léger’s mixture of past and present creates a tension in his paintings that brings an undeniably modern sensibility to his work.\textsuperscript{40} At the same time, Léger’s devotion to the machine aesthetic meant that his classical

\textsuperscript{37} Herbert makes this case in: \textit{From Millet to Léger: Essays in Social Art History} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 132. “The choice of three figures was no accident,” he writes, Like Seurat and Puvis, Léger wished to renew the old traditions represented by the three nudes: the three Graces, the three rivals for the judgment of Paris, or the three major arts (painting, sculpture, architecture), not to mention Picasso’s \textit{Three Women at the Spring} (1921).” Herbert, “Léger’s \textit{Le Grand Déjeuner},” 23, 25.

\textsuperscript{38} As James D. Herbert explains, “robot men—mechanics, farmers, and tugboat pilots—toil to earn the leisure awaiting them among the robot women in Léger’s planned, idealized interior.” James D. Herbert, “New Wine in Old Bottles: French Art Following World War I,” in \textit{Chaos and Classicism}, 142.

\textsuperscript{39} Green, \textit{Léger and the Avant-Garde}, 235.

\textsuperscript{40} Herbert, \textit{From Millet to Léger}, 128.
figures became modern icons. His women, for example, are often “straight as a column…with a perfectly rounded breast (like a cannonball) and luxuriant tresses falling on one shoulder (with the gleam of sheet metal).” What is more, their “impassive machine perfection” robs them of individuality and creates “an impersonal, even inhuman coldness” as well as “a pure asexual power held in check [only] by an exact, modern sense of structure.” Through a continuing commitment to modern aesthetics and style, Léger thus brought classical figures and harmonies into a modern context, subjecting them to the tensions and machinations of contemporary society.

As a part of this modernized tradition, the composition of Femmes à l’Interieur (fig. 4.5) centers on two familiar female types as it places a clothed mother and child pair in the same representational space as three female nudes. Dressed in brightly colored, column-like dresses, the mother and child in this painting occupy the foremost ground of a rather shallow space. In their body language they seem to echo one another, and their featureless faces seem directed toward the viewer. Just behind them, three nude figures painted in grisaille pose on what might be a yellow couch. To the mother and child’s right, one nude lies on her side, her right hand placed on the child’s right arm. Behind her, a darker and more abstracted figure hunches over, perhaps leaning on the back of the couch, one arm reaching down toward the other figures. Finally, to the mother’s left a third nude sits on the geometric yellow surface, one leg crossed over the other, her left arm also reaching toward the mother and child pair. Each of these nude figures has the “cannonball” breast described by Silver; two have the blanket of hair falling over

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one shoulder. Broken up in cubist fashion, the limbs of all the figures overlap, intertwine, and become confused in the play of shapes and shadows. It is impossible to tell, for example, whether the hand that rests on the child’s shoulder belongs to the mother or the nude who lounges just behind them. Similarly, the book held in the mother’s left hand is perfectly posed to rest on the knee of the nude behind her. In addition to the confusion of limbs and objects, because Léger has chosen not to give any of the figures facial features, they all seem more like machines or mannequins than human figures.

Within this composition, a tension is created between the clothed and the unclothed. The two female types, while they occupy the same space, remain differentiated from one another, and the mother continues to stand apart, as if her maternal status separates her from her companions. As in Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (fig. 4.6), the nude figures stand out against the figures in dresses and their lack of clothing seems significant. Though Léger’s machine-like figures do not take on the same uncomfortable sexualized “nakedness” as the nudes in Manet’s painting, in *Femmes dans un Intérieur*, clothing does act as a key distinguishing feature between the mother and child pair and the modernized nudes behind them. Perched behind a mother and child wearing long dresses, the nude figures seem odd. For Herbert, the contrast of the clothed and unclothed figures prompts viewers to understand the nudes as a sort of classical sculpture, while the mother and child are meant to be understood as “real” people.43 This certainly seems a viable interpretation based on the visual cues Léger has placed in his composition. It is also a conveniently conservative division of female types. The real people are the mother and child who wear long, modest dresses that convey a sense of their humble morality while a small dog,

43 Herbert, “Léger’s *Le Grand Déjeuner,*” 132. It is interesting that on Léger’s canvas the mother and child appear as “real,” while the female nudes are seen as “art” or “sculpture.”
symbol of fidelity and selfless love, huddles close to their feet. The nudes, by contrast, are not living women flaunting (or embracing) their sexuality, but artworks within an artwork. Unlike the mother and child, this contrast implies, the nude women do not exist in reality. Even if all female figures are viewed in the same terms, a division still occurs as the clothing places the women into separate categories. Though the mother and child could easily disrobe to join the nudes, or the nudes could don clothing to join the mother and child, some sort of action has to be taken in order to bridge the gap between them. Thus certain tensions and divisions permeate this crowded composition, as the clothed, presumably maternal figure stands apart from the other women.

Certainly such separation is consistent with contemporaneous artistic and cultural trends that most often used mothers and female nudes to define two different aspects of the ideal of Woman. Despite obvious differences in dress, these figures do come together, not only occupying the same space but gathering around the same child. Indeed, though scholars like Green insist that the image is divided according to a binary of clothed versus unclothed, the two clothed figures are in fact separated by various details of the work. The most striking of these,

44 In the spirit of comparing this work to the work of Manet, the dog also contrasts with the scandalous black cat portrayed in Olympia. Unlike the “sensual cat” this figure speaks to faithfulness and steadfast attachments. This comparison between Léger’s dog and Manet’s cat is made in Green, Léger and the Avant-Garde, 23.

45 Of course, when so much of the distinction between these two female types rests on the delineation of clothed vs. nude, these women’s roles could easily be reversed as quickly as they could exchange clothing. In some ways, this could be perceived as threatening to conservative society as the young, presumably female child, who represents future generations and whose choices determine the future of her country, could so easily make the choice to join with the nude figure whose arms already seem to enfold her. If the nude represents more of a modern woman figure than a mother, this choice would be to reject a traditional path.

the dark blue vase, makes it unclear whose hand rests on the child’s shoulder. The child’s body language reinforces this division as he or she turns from the clothed figure and toward the leftmost nude. This pair, the nude and child, are wrapped in a rather close embrace; the nude’s arms appear to enfold the child protectively, and their fingers touch. What is more, the child’s head is level with the woman’s breast. Such details seem to point to the nude as the child’s mother, rather than the clothed female figure and, in so doing, they defy easy interpretation. Like the work explored in chapter three, *Femmes dans un Intérieur* elicits questions more than it provides answers. It also surprises as what seemed at first straightforward becomes more convoluted upon closer inspection. With such confusion, Léger not only creates what Green deems an undeniably modern sensibility, but also opens up new possibilities. Despite the apparent division of figures and the emphasis on the mother as woman apart, this painting ultimately offers more than one woman the possibility of a maternal relationship with the same child, almost as if offering the possibility of alternative motherhoods.

In another work, *Personnages dans un Jardin* (fig. 4.7), Léger again takes up the theme of motherhood.47 This time, however, all figures are clothed. Three figures, two women (identified as such by their “cannonball breasts”) and one child look out at the viewer. Again, one female figure reclines while another leans over her in an upright position. The child in this image appears to be moving off, or perhaps on to, the canvas as he or she is partially hidden by what appears to be a doorframe and yellow wall. Though the figures are still made up of geometric shapes, in this work Léger has moved away from a confusion of arms and hands and has instead made each figure more contained. Though multiple sources have identified this as

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47 Of course, this theme appears frequently in his work of this period, but the combination of two women and a child is less common. It does, however, appear even in sketches like *Deux Femmes et Enfant*, 1921.
three generations—daughter, mother, grandmother—little differentiates the ages of the two adults.\textsuperscript{48} The smooth, almost metallic surfaces of their skin give no indication of age and their connection, while intimate, does not clearly suggest a mother-daughter relationship. For Silver, this painting acts as an example of mothers and children and “happy families” that “abound” in art of this period when French society was so highly influenced by pronatalist sentiment.\textsuperscript{49} Yet what sort of family? Laid out behind the daughter or son, the lounging woman in red seems to be more closely connected to the child and could be seen as his or her mother. But the woman in blue reaches down, her hand just touching the child’s shoulder and again creating something of a separation between the possible mother and offspring. Thus it is as if both women have some claim or relationship to the child as well as to one another.

In order to better understand this painting, it is possible to turn to another of Léger’s works, \textit{Personnages devant un Jardin} (fig. 4.8).\textsuperscript{50} Created during the same year as \textit{Personnages dans un Jardin}, this canvas depicts a nearly identical composition with one significant change: the third figure in the background is male. Posed in a very similar setting, the background figure is again dressed in blue and again reaches down toward the lounging woman in red with both hands. The child is again partially cropped by what could be a doorframe and door, though less of his or her body is obscured than in the work discussed above. The details of the setting are similar: the group appears to be partially inside and partially out, as if posed on the boundary


\textsuperscript{50} Similarly, a study (fig. 4.9) that supposedly served as inspiration for these two paintings as well as two others captures both male and female adult subjects.
between living room and balcony. Rolling hills and ovoid trees occupy the background, a distinctive green plant in a curvy pot sits on a dresser on the lefthand side of the work. The lounging maternal figure holds a book in both hands. Significantly, however, in this work the background figure, the man, is separated from the others by what appears to be the back of a couch, and his hands do not touch the child. Still, despite this separation of figures, the group nonetheless reads as a family, and this time it is clearly the traditional mother, father, and child.

Using this work to help decipher the group in *Personnages dans un Jardin*, it would have been possible for viewers to read a progressive or alternative message in Léger’s painting if they so chose. Taking up the position of the father, a second female figure, identified only by the addition of a breast, makes an even more intimate connection to the mother and child before her. Smooth skin and short (or pulled back) dark hair do not cast her as a grandmother. It could seem, therefore, in this context that Léger has depicted a lesbian couple with their child. Certainly, this is only one of many possible readings (the woman could be an aunt, for example). But within the context of the period and the sexual liberation of women like the garçonne who were frequently depicted as lesbian, even the possibility of this reading seems progressive. Here Léger, an active participant in the conservative return to order, has created an image in which an intimate relationship between two women and child is glorified. Perhaps the existence of the child helps to legitimize the women’s relationship. Perhaps, like the conservative commentators who validated alternative forms of motherhood in the name of pronatalism, Léger here concedes another option as long as it provides France with growth. Whatever the case, again a sort of surrogate or alternative motherhood can be identified.

A participant in the call to order, Léger found unique ways of expressing and modernizing traditional values. Focused on contrasts and modernity, he created tensions within
his canvases intended to bring convention to the present. As he attempted to update traditional figures like the female nude and the mother he also exposed new possibilities for French women. The confusion of relationships in both Femmes dans un Intérieur and Personnages dans un Jardin allow for a representation of alternative motherhoods. Likely supportive of these possibilities in the same ways as the pronatalists’ articles in newspapers like Le Matin, Léger’s work thus remains consistent with the part of French society willing to accept and support mothers of “all kinds.”

Another View: Suzanne Valadon and Marie Laurencin

Around the same time that Léger explored themes of motherhood and modernity, a range of female artists also engaged the subject of motherhood. As with Léger’s figures, the women that appear in the compositions of many female artists from this period do not fit easily into a simple, conservative, return-to-order narrative. Indeed, as Paula J. Birnbaum observes, works created by women artists of the interwar period “present a rich range of viewpoints on maternity” and define “the conflicts of modern motherhood from diverse female vantage points.”51 What is more, in paintings by females artists, as seen in works like de Lempicka’s Maternity (1928) (fig. 3.2), mothers and modern women come together to create much more complex negotiations of femininity.52

51 Paula J. Birnbaum, Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 84.
52 Here I am thinking of the contrast between Picasso’s Mother and Child (1921) and Léger’s Le Grand Déjeuner (1921-2) with de Lempicka’s Maternity (1928). For a discussion of Maternity, see the previous chapter. Though not a part of this chapter, Hélène Dufau’s Vacances au bord de la mer (1925) is another interesting and striking comparison image. It captures a man, woman, and baby in front of a large window overlooking the Cap d’Antibes in the south of France. The mother is seated holding on her knees a baby who seems to be on the verge of escape from her lap. The naked infant has golden curls framing his face while the mother sports the bob, tanned skin, and low-cut bathing suit of a modern fashionable (and sexualized) woman. The man stands behind this pair, looking out over the sea. He wears a sailor’s cap and crisp white slacks and his torso is bare, showing that he too has the newly fashionable bronze tan. Critics like Arsène Alexandre lauded this image for bringing the mother and child motif up
As artists and residents of Paris during the interwar period, Suzanne Valadon and Marie Laurencin witnessed the artistic results of the return to order and the conservative trend in representations of mother and child figures. Though excluded from the mainstream art world by the rhetoric of the “woman artist,” they, like their male counterparts, similarly turned their attention to traditional mother and child compositions during this period, but in subversive ways. Their paintings did not so easily glorify biological bourgeois motherhood. The women in their canvases instead seem to have more complex stories and more complex relationships with the “children” that they nurture. Like Picasso and Léger, who never turned exclusively to tradition or mother and child imagery, these two artists continued to paint many different subjects and themes during the interwar period. Still, in a few of their paintings they also took on the familiar themes of the breastfeeding mother, the mother holding or presenting her child, and the little girl playing mommy. Pushing against conservative maternal imagery, however, Valadon and Laurencin alter traditional imagery by replacing infants and children with pets and toys. With these substitutions, the women on their canvases transform from demure, traditional, stay-at-home mothers into potentially threatening single women. Rather than promoting a safe sense of “natural motherhood” and a clear picture of reproduction, growth, and tradition, these paintings raise many unanswered questions as they glorify surrogate motherhoods. The following three sections will explore each thematic type of surrogate motherhood as represented in the works of Valadon and Laurencin and in so doing illuminate the ways these subversive images promote and glorify alternative possibilities for women living in interwar France.

to date. Others, however, did not appreciate the loose morals they saw represented in this work. For an extended discussion of this image see, Birnbaum, Women Artists, 67-70.
Examined consistently against the perceived achievements of male artists, female artists were overwhelming judged to be of a “separate,” and often lesser, category of accomplishment. In general, critics described the work (and by extension the person) of male artists as virile, powerful, and unique. The work (and person) of female artists, however, was dainty, emotional, and imitative. In his *Histoire générale de l’art français* (General History of French Art), for example, influential art critic Louis Vauxcelles included female artists only to emphasize their “inferiority” and their inability to achieve the desired “spontaneous, liberated vision” that defines “great” art made by male artists.\(^{53}\) Similarly, Jean-Louis Vaudoyer wrote in the *Echo de Paris* that “women’s painting is generally the docile and adroit reflection of masculine painting.”\(^{54}\) Even feminist newspaper *La Française* published an article asserting that, despite the ability of women to achieve greatness in art, so far female artists had merely “contented themselves with restating what man had already said but in a minor key.”\(^{55}\) Thus, as Gill Perry asserts, “Amateurism…delicacy, and charm [were] established as the qualities of a ‘feminine’ art, qualities which were seen to be represented symbolically by the *forms féminines* of their canvases.”\(^{56}\) It did no, however, take a historian’s separation from the moment to see the effect of such judgments on female artists working in interwar France. Even in 1936, Madeleine

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54 Untitled clipping from February 4, 1926, in the dossier Marie Laurencin held at the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand.

55 This same article quotes Vauxcelles expressing serious doubts that women could be as good as men in the plastic arts. Unidentified author, “Femmes Artistes,” *La Française*, October 20, 1928.

Bunoust lamented the “singularly powerful and persistent” prejudices that deemed women “too sensitive, too emotional to be great artists.”

Suzanne Valadon and Marie Laurencin, two of the most successful and widely-accepted female artists of their time, were not immune to this prejudice. Yet their refusal to embrace traditional codes of bourgeois femininity complicated the possibility of simply dismissing their work in these terms. As with most female artists of the time, Valadon’s and Laurencin’s popularity was tied not only to their professional skill, but also to the details of their biographies. Beginning as an artists’ model from the poor neighborhood of Pigalle, where she lived alone and worked to support the son she had out of wedlock, Valadon first appeared on the modern art scene in the work of well-known painters from Puvis de Chavannes to Auguste Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec. Throughout her career, she was known as the “little model” who closely followed in the footsteps made by her mentors, such as Degas. After her son began to paint (at


58 Marie Laurencin’s paintings of women were seen as not only fitting the mold of ideal “feminine art,” but as, in many cases, defining that ideal. They were labeled “tender,” “charming,” “coquetish,” and even “voluptuously sentimental.” *La Liberté* (November 14, 1926) and Jean-Louis Vaudoyer in *Écho de Paris* (February 4, 1926): both are clippings from the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand’s dossier on Laurencin BMD DOS LAU. Guillaume Apollinaire distinguished her style as having an “entirely feminine aesthetic” that “stands apart from simple decoration while remaining just as pleasant.” Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les Peintres Cubistes: Méditations Esthétiques* (Paris: Berg International Éditeurs, 1986), 60, 68. Suzanne Valadon’s work, by contrast, was frequently seen as embodying qualities that were generally reserved for the work of male artists. Yet, as often as critics discussed the masculine qualities of her work, they still frequently insisted on calling her a “female artist” whose work contributed to the legacy of specifically “feminine art.” See, for example: Florence Fels, quoted in Rey, Robert. *Suzanne Valadon* : 10.

59 In 1922, Robert Rey commented that she not only used similar models to those of Degas, but that she also approached them from a similar angle. Rey, Robert. *Suzanne Valadon*, 10.
her encouragement, no less), she then took on the role of the artist’s mother, despite her own prolific career. In fact, according to Vauxcelles, her true shining glory was not her artwork at all but “having given life to one of the most extraordinary colorists [coloristes] of the école moderne, this Maurice Utrillo whose career is also legendary.”

No amount of attention to her role as a mother, however, could cast her in a traditional guise. Living at a great distance from the bourgeois class, unwed at the time of Utrillo’s birth, and entering into a romance and later marriage with a much younger man, her son’s friend André Utter, from whom she would ultimately separate, Valadon seemed to consistently push against conservative ideals of woman’s role in society.

Similarly, Laurencin was no “containable femme à foyer.” Entering the cubist circle through her romantic relationship with Guillaume Apollinaire, Laurencin never lived down the image of an “artist’s lover.” After a short marriage to German-born painter and baron Otto von Waëtjen that lasted only through the First World War, she never again took a male lover. Moreover, a hysterectomy in the 1920s left her unable to hope for biological motherhood.

According to Elizabeth Louise Kahn, Laurencin was, at all of these moments “a young woman in the process of negotiating her way out of conventional femininities,” “masquerading her lesbian identity, and at times mimicking the acceptable image of the great artist.” Her romantic

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61 Elizabeth Louise Kahn, Marie Laurencin: Une Femme Inadaptée In Feminist Histories of Art (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), xvii.

62 Though their liaison was relatively brief it continues to dominate her biography to this day.

63 Kahn, Marie Laurencin, 89.

64 Ibid., xvii, 1.
relationships with other women, along with her inability to have her own children, meant that she could not define herself in terms of a heterosexual marriage or biological motherhood.

During their careers, then, these women’s non-traditional biographies positioned them outside the boundaries of normative bourgeois femininity. Conscious of their life choices, viewers and critics of their work would have brought an awareness of such subversion to their engagement with Valadon’s and Laurencin’s paintings. In this context, details that might not otherwise seem destabilizing could easily have taken on a note of dissention or alterity. The images discussed in the following sections play with obvious substitutions that push against tradition even outside the context of these artist’s lives. Compounded with Valadon’s and Laurencin’s reputations as non-traditional, the surrogacy on their canvases takes on added significance.

Valadon: Re-inventing the Breastfeeding Mother Image

One of the most familiar and recognizable representations of biological maternity, the figure of the breastfeeding mother played a large role in the visual culture of interwar France. Gino Severini’s *Motherhood* (1916) (fig. 1.16), Picasso’s *Maternité* (1921) (fig. 1.31), and Henri Lebasque’s Peace Loan Poster (1920) (fig. 1.18) all testify to the importance of this image in promoting a sense of security and hope for the future. Within this context, Suzanne Valadon’s *Young Girl with Cat* (1919) (fig. 4.10) and *Louison et Raminou* (1920) (fig. 4.11) seem familiar and yet challenging. In each of these paintings, a mother and child figure are present, but the “child” in each work is not a human infant, but a cat. Posed on their “mother’s” laps as if they could nurse at any moment, these animals complicate the traditionally conservative compositions in which they participate. They leave viewers questioning the female figures’ status (are these
married mothers who also dote on their cats or single women whose pets have taken the place of biological offspring?). But at the same time the careful representation of these women and the tenderness inherent in the compositions glorifies an alternative femininity. At a time when images of single women so frequently played on stereotypes of the heartless crone or the helpless waif, these images of strong, healthy, and caring women present an appealing alternative interpretation.

Both posed in a three-quarters view, the female figures of *Young Girl with Cat* and *Louison et Raminou* sit comfortably in interior spaces. The young girl looks out toward the viewer, her deep red lips and large eyes giving the impression of an emerging smile. Her rosy cheeks, wavy dark brown hair, and pale skin give her a youthful air. She wears a simple sleeveless blue dress (or perhaps matching top and long skirt) with a beaded necklace hung around her neck. Surprisingly, her hands and wrists are quite red, as if the skin has been damaged or irritated by manual labor, though the details of the painting give no clues as to what sort of work that might be. The seemingly older figure in *Louison et Raminou* looks down at the cat in her lap rather than out towards a viewer. Her reddish brown hair is swept off her neck in a low bun, which keeps her thick locks from obscuring the details of her profile. Unlike the youthful pink and white skin of the girl in the other portrait, Louison’s cheeks seem ruddy, her entire face a darker shade than the paler skin of her neck.65 She is dressed in a dark green top or dress that

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65 The details of these women’s skin support what many critics and scholars have insisted, that Valadon was interested in capturing a working-class rather than bourgeois femininity in her work. Birnbaum writes, “Valadon does not idealize her models’ facial and bodily features in this or other paintings; some critics saw this as reflecting her interest in representing their working-class status.” *Women Artists in Interwar France*, 196. Similarly, Patricia Matthews argues that “her experiences as model and artist, and as bohemian, working-class woman were crucial to her choice, interpretation, and adaptation of artistic conventions.” *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 179.
nearly blends into the dark green of the background, drawing attention instead to her hooded eyes, hooked nose, and pursed lips that assert her individuality.

In both paintings the cats are curled calmly in the female figures’ laps and the darker shades of their fur approximate the women’s hair colors. In *Young Girl with Cat*, the feline companion, much like the young girl, also echoes her engagement with the viewer by facing outward, its piercing yellow eyes demanding attention. Moreover, the cat’s body curls toward the girl as her body leans toward the cat, creating a sense of familiarity, comfort, and mutual trust. In *Louison et Raminou*, by contrast, the cat faces away from its human companion. Again copying the female figure, the cat looks away from the viewer, but, whereas Louison’s hooded eyes look down meaningfully towards the cat, Raminou looks off the left of the canvas. In this image, the cat seems less interested in its human companion than in *Young Girl with Cat*. Still, in both paintings the female figures encircle the cats with their arms in a possessive and protective gesture.

The strong bond between animal and human in these portraits is not a new or wholly unexpected theme, as pets have a strong presence in the history of French portraiture. Indeed, as Kathleen Kete explains, “the ever-faithful pet was a fiction that had its origin in antiquity” and that developed and changed throughout the subsequent centuries.66 Though Laura Brown warns that “the imaginary animal resists any simple positioning or singular interpretation,” certain trends in texts and images do stand out.67 Kete has shown, for example, that in the nineteenth century petkeeping “relieved the pressures of contemporary life” and allowed the French

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bourgeoisie to “imagine a better, more manageable version of the world.” ⁶⁸ In Paris, in particular, the care of domestic animals was generally a bourgeois pastime and was often conceived as an antidote to the losses and lacks of modern culture. Like the devoted mother, the faithful dog—selfless and disinterested—was “a dream image of the past.” ⁶⁹ According to Brown, pets also “inspired modes of thought that question conventional hierarchies” and had the power to “instantly transform” alterity into “intimacy.” ⁷⁰ In addition, while they have played roles as “commodity, companion, paragon, proxy, and even kin,” pets were most frequently associated with the cultural practices of women. ⁷¹

Certainly, Valadon’s paintings remain consistent with this association between women and pets, and her compositions could be positioned as an antidote to the losses of modernity as well as images of transformative intimacy. In both Young Girl with Cat and Louison et Raminou, the tender gaze and close connection between female and feline leave no room for concern over population growth or postwar recovery. As peaceful, loving portraits, these paintings omit details that might point to a rapidly changing contemporary society. What is more, through the intimacy depicted, Valadon’s paintings transform both the alterity of the pet, by bringing it into the position of a child, and the alterity of the single woman, by bringing her into the familiar and lauded position of mother.

Indeed, by exploring the theme of woman and pet in her work, Valadon joins a long history of representations of this relationship. Though the lady and the lapdog had been a

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⁶⁸ Kete, The Beast in the Boudoir, 2.
⁶⁹ Ibid., 24.
⁷⁰ Brown, Homeless Dogs, 24 and 65.
⁷¹ Ibid., 69.
familiar trope in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, more recently companion animals had taken on significance on the canvases of many Impressionist artists. In literature, the lapdog “typically invoke(s) a set of allied images of female sexuality: the woman’s bed, the breast, the nap, the lap, sometimes the gaze, and especially the kiss” as the dog itself becomes both “an inappropriate or perverse sexual partner for the woman, and also a metonym for female sexuality.” On the canvases of Auguste Renoir, Mary Cassatt, and Berthe Morisot, the lapdog became a symbol of “domesticity rather than independence.” As James Rubin explains, in the work of these three artists, the lapdog emphasized conformity, dependence, and, perhaps, an unthinking devotion to the house and its family. In Renoir’s paintings of his mistress Aline, for example, the dog acts as an attribute of a woman ripe with maternal possibilities. Once she is established, Rubin argues, the mistress takes on the care of the high-maintenance and fashionable dog, eschewing the independent cat who would have been more suitable for someone with less time to devote to caregiving. The dog then stays with Aline into images of her as wife and mother, acting as a symbol of her domesticity and maternal instinct. Thus, in both art and culture dogs operated as symbols of domestic bliss. Moreover, the potential of a pet to evoke the innocence of a child as well as the need for careful, parental love and attention stressed the comparison between female pet owners and bourgeois mothers.

Though they do stress devotion and an equivalency between female pet owners and mothers, Valadon’s images focus not on the faithful dog, but on the much more ambivalent cat.

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72 Ibid., 72.


74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 95-7.
Whereas the “faithful and affective dog” expressed eternal devotion to its master, the intelligent and fiercely independent cat was, at best, loyal to its household, but never to the people who live there. Instead of a symbol of fidelity and commitment, the cat became a sort of status symbol for bohemian intellectuals and artists during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, a symbol of “values forced to the margins of bourgeois life:” “supreme individualism,” “the liberty and integrity of an artist who refused to be sold,” discernment, and a refusal to compromise. At the same time, a history of an association between cats, sexuality, and the occult gave the cat an air of mystery and even danger. “[The cat’s] natural qualities can readily be interpreted as evidence of uncanny abilities,” writes Katharine M. Rogers, “its silent, inconspicuous movements suggest that it can magically appear and disappear. Its dispassionate, wide-eyed gaze, unusually direct for an animal, suggests that it is challenging humans or relentlessly searching into their inner selves.” Despite such associations, however, the cat did come to hold its own connection to domesticity. Indeed, though it was never a loyal servant, the female cat did possess revered maternal qualities.

76 Kete, The Beast in the Boudoir, 130 and 127.

77 Ibid., 123-25.

78 This perception of cats as supernatural Katharine Rogers traces to the Middle Ages when, “unfortunately for the cat, magical powers were generally supposed to come from the devil.” See: Katharine M. Rogers, The Cat and the Human Imagination: Feline Images from Bast to Garfield (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 45. These associations (sexuality, the occult) motivated much of the critique of the black cat in Manet’s Olympia, a figure that received a good deal of attention and was often even exaggerated in reviews and cartoons of the painting. Rubin also discusses the ways in which the white cat in Courbet’s The Studio comes to represent the artist’s independence. See, Rubin, Impressionist Cats and Dogs, 13-22.

79 Rogers, The Cat and the Human Imagination, 4.

80 Ibid., 173.
associated in literature and culture with independence, intelligence, mystery, sexuality, and an aloof domesticity.

Again, artists like Renoir used these animals to bring out certain themes in their work. In one of the three versions of Renoir’s *Maternité (Femme allaitant son enfant)* (1886) (fig. 4.12), a cat stands as an emblem of maternal instinct. Positioned to the side of Aline and their child, the cat, according to Rubin, “provides a seemingly natural adjunct to Aline’s new maternal activity,” drawing parallels between woman and cat as “instinctual creatures fulfilling biological destiny.”

Within the wider scope of Renoir’s oeuvre, however, cats are more frequently associated with themes of sensuality and sexuality. As Rogers explains, “Renoir’s numerous paintings of luscious girls or women cuddling equally luscious cats exert an intense sensuous appeal,” as “the two young subjects simultaneously exemplify and enjoy the sensory pleasures of nature.”

Rubin similarly points to works like *Sleeping Girl with Cat* (1880) (fig. 4.13) as examples of paintings in which human and cat represent “innocence and risk.” In *Sleeping Girl with Cat*, for example, as the dress strap of the naïve and sweetly sleeping young female figure falls off her shoulder, Renoir carefully engages “obvious erotic fantasies of female innocence.”

Sprawled comfortably in her lap, exposing its underbelly, her feline companion similarly takes on associations with such themes.

Certainly the larger body of Valadon’s work would suggest her own interest in exploring themes of sexuality and desire. Frequently taking on the subject of the female nude, Valadon

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81 Ibid., 121.
82 Ibid., 174-5.
84 Ibid., 112.
created many “provocative” images of female sexuality during her career.⁸⁵ Of course, as Birnbaum and Rosemary Betterton observe, she denied traditional voyeuristic readings of her female subjects through a close attention to detail, realistic rather than idealistic contexts, and a “refusal” to paint the typical beauty.⁸⁶ This allowed Valadon to engage female sexuality in a different way. Her paintings gave her female subjects agency where work by other, typically male, artists seemed only concerned with the desire of the viewer. Regardless of her approach to the theme, negotiations of sexuality and sexual tension frequently appeared in Valadon’s work and would suggest the possibility that they are latent within Young Girl with Cat and Louison et Raminou as well.

With her fresh pink cheeks, pale skin, and dark hair, the girl in Young Girl with Cat conforms to traditional expectations of female beauty. Like Renoir’s Sleeping Girl with Cat, she wears white and light blue and her top is sleeveless. Key differences do set her apart: where Renoir’s subject is blissfully unaware of the viewer as she rests with one strap of her top falling away from her shoulder, Valadon’s figure meets the viewer’s gaze and the straps of her dress remain chastely on her shoulders. Still, however, the cats occupy a similar place on the girls’ bodies, splitting the viewer’s attention between the female subjects’ lovely faces and their laps. Valadon’s composition is lacking the sensuous brushstrokes, soft colors and shadows, and sinuous curves of Renoir’s. Similarly, in Louison et Raminou Valadon does not attempt to heighten the sensuality or sexuality of her subject. But in both of these images viewers could still have seen a relation between women, cats, and sex. Associations with cats and female sexuality


ran deep within French collective thought and aesthetic details, like brushstroke, could not
override the possibility of such connections. Moreover, because even her most blatantly
sexualized paintings, like *Reclining Nude* (1928) (fig. 4.14) or *Catherine Reclining Nude on a
Panther Skin* (1923) (fig. 4.15), deny standard expressions of female sensuality and availability,
it seems plausible that, though understated, themes of female sexuality are still present in the cat
paintings.

Still, in these two paintings, Valadon has chosen compositions that much more closely
resemble and recall traditional representations of motherhood than any sexualized images of
female models. As if looking more to Renoir’s compositions in which cats symbolize maternal
ability than his more sexualized representations, Valadon’s *Young Girl with Cat*, painted the year
of Renoir’s death, seems to reference his *Maternité* (1886). 87 Despite the variations in distance
from viewer, setting, and dress, both women sit in a three-quarters view and stare out at the
viewer, their round faces tilted slightly upward and to the right. Both women cradle something in
their arms and both paintings not only have cats, but the same calico breed. 88 Their pink cheeks
give them a youthful air and their red lips draw up into slight smiles. They both have slightly

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87 As a model for Renoir, Valadon was familiar with the artist and his work and could easily have seen his paintings
as a source for her own. According to Adolphe Basler and Charles Kunstler, Renoir was one of the artists, along
than the “great master,” they do record evidence of a familiarity with both Renoir and his work that shows through
in the similarities between *Mother and Child* and *Young Girl with Cat*. According to Warnod, one of the three titles
given to Valadon’s 1909 painting of two nudes, *Neither White nor Black*, was aimed directly at Renoir. “According
to Renoir’s guidelines,” Valadon explained to a friend, “pure black and white do not exist in painting.” Jeanine
given image, this statement also hints at the possible ambiguity within a given artwork: visual language always
leaves open the possibility for many layers of meaning and complexity. Thus, rather than trying to copy the
“master,” Valadon seems to have used his work as a source she could shape to create her own messages.

88 This is even more significant in that calico cats are predominantly female (the orange and black colorings are
carried on the X-chromosome so male cats cannot have both unless they have three sex chromosomes).
reddened hands and wrists that seem to attest to a certain amount of manual labor—perhaps washing clothes or, in Madame Renoir’s case, diapers. Though Madame Renoir wears a red jacket and an outfit that clearly dates to an earlier period than Valadon’s young girl, both women wear light skirts and their fashion (or, perhaps, lack thereof) indicates that neither is particularly wealthy. In terms of artistic style, Valadon chooses a darker palette with more pronounced dark greens and yellows and starker highlighting, but the short, painterly brushstrokes used by both Valadon and Renoir give each painting a softness that lends a dream-like quality to the scenes. Such similarities connect these paintings across time and charge Valadon’s young girl with a legacy of tradition.

It is these very connections, however, that give Valadon’s painting a sense of subversion as they use tradition to glorify a non-biological mother figure. Indeed, Betterton has argued that this is a larger trend within Valadon’s oeuvre; her ability to demonstrate a familiarity with “current discourses of art” while reinventing the details of conventional imagery shows “a conscious and deliberate attempt to change existing codes of representation.”

In this case, in a significant break with Renoir’s legacy, Valadon moves the calico cat from the foreground of the painting to the human figure’s lap. In this transition, the cat shifts from a maternal role to a dependent role. Where Renoir’s image emphasized the maternal act of breastfeeding, Valadon’s composition denies the possibility of such an act (though the cat’s head is positioned at the young girl’s breast). What is more, whereas in Renoir’s Maternité baby Pierre’s genitals quite literally overlay his mother’s, the female cat in Valadon’s Young Girl with Cat does not rob this woman of her sexuality. Though she may be young and innocent, this is a girl in control. Unlike Renoir’s maternal figure, this girl is not beholden to anyone. The independent cat will not need

her attention and care night and day as the infant will need his mother’s. But by so closely echoing tradition, this work does not startle the viewer. Instead it gently introduces an alternative and, by closely focusing attention on these two pleasant figures, builds up a positive image of a woman and a pet. The need for an infant and the question of this figure’s maternal status begin to fade in the lovely blues and pinks of this composition.

Similarly, in *Louison and Raminou* the close cropping of the composition and the tenderness shown by Louison push aside an insistent questioning of this woman and her marital status. Instead, this image plays on themes of maternal devotion as it echoes more conservative contemporary images. Created the same year, Lebasque’s Peace Loan poster (fig. 1.18) also focuses on a woman in profile with reddish hair pulled into a low bun. She, too, has something of a prominent nose and pursed red lips. Her jacket, a dark blue green, matches the coloring of the bushes behind her daughter and shares certain tones with the field behind her. Her head is craned further down toward her child than Louison’s is toward Raminou, but both women gaze intently toward the living beings in their laps. Though Louison does not offer her breast to the pet, she, like Lebasque’s maternal figure, bends toward Raminou, her body tenderly and protectively encircling the cat. It is unclear which of these images came first and so impossible to draw any conclusions about possible debts of inspiration. What is clear, however, is that these two images drew from a shared visual culture. The likeness of these two maternal figures attests to a certain “look” for the icon of the ideal mother in interwar France.

Again, however, Valadon has chosen to replace a human child with a cat and has cropped her image to focus only on two figures, leaving the moralizing message out of her work.90

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90 Interestingly, the fur on the cat’s head has a yellowish hue, much as the baby in Lebasque’s poster has a yellowish-orange feathering of hair.
Lebasque’s mother figure is not alone with her nursing infant. In his image, as she offers her breast to one child she also sits with an older daughter, as if simultaneously performing her job to sustain and educate France’s future generations. The flower tucked into her hair and her connection to the flora surrounding her emphasize this as her natural role. Behind her, men construct walls and buildings. They farm and fish and run factories. Their world is the smoky, productive city and a tamed version of nature. The mother and her children are held separate from this and yet close enough to the men that there is no doubt these are representations of men’s and women’s duties to their country. In Valadon’s image all this fades, as if, when swapping infant and pet, “natural” predilections and duty to one’s country also disappear. Though Louison does still wear green and though her clothing does match the green of the background, this does not tie her to nature. If anything, she happens to match the wallpapered or painted interior wall behind her. There is no sense that her care for Raminou is a duty of some sort and all questions of her role in society seem cropped out of the frame along with the extra figures and scenes. In certain ways, woman’s maternal instinct does remain intact. The tenderness shown toward her feline companion could be interpreted as Louison’s nature: she cannot help but mother this animal as she would a child. But the fact remains that there is no child in her lap.\(^9\) The animal here actively turns away from the maternal figure’s breast as if well aware that there is nothing it can provide. What is more, if woman’s duty to her country was to procreate, this figure is actively rejecting her role in the rebuilding of France.

\(^9\) The maternal affection and tenderness in this portrait far exceeds any such sentiment in Valadon’s paintings of an actual mother and child pair. In *Portrait of Marie Coca and Her Daughter* (1913), she depicts a mother and child who seem only physically, not mentally or emotionally, connected. The mother stares off into space, seemingly unaware of her surroundings (much like de Lempicka’s mother discussed in the previous chapter) while the daughter stares out of the canvas. It is uncomfortable to meet the little girl’s cold, nearly vacant glance. Moreover, she seems to be preparing for a similar “fate” as she holds a doll on her lap, symbol of her future motherhood.
Valadon’s choice to replace the expected infants in her compositions with cats destabilizes conservative interpretations of her work. If these women do have maternal instincts, they do not fully embrace them as Renoir’s or Lebasque’s mothers do. Placed inside rather than in natural surroundings, these women do not have traditional ties to nature, despite the cats in their laps. What is more, cultural ambivalence towards cats and the belief that they are more independent and sexualized animals than their canine counterparts lend even more of a rebellious undercurrent to these images. Cats had a reputation as the low-maintenance pet, requiring much less attention and care than dogs—not to mention how much less they would need than a human infant. This leaves open the possibility that these women could be much more independent than their maternal counterparts. Moreover, the associations between felines and sexuality could draw out impressions of these women’s sexual independence.

Despite all this, however, the affinity with traditional images of breastfeeding mothers also helps to smooth over the subversion on Valadon’s part. These compositions are familiar from generations of idealized images that represent France’s (and even humanity’s) hopes for the future. Viewers are thus primed to accept what is presented as familiar and comforting. Certainly, there is the problem of the missing children, but the tender, maternal love and care remains. As she encourages viewers to forget the cultural insistence on biological motherhood, Valadon glorifies a different type of affection, that between a woman and her pet. Counter to the very closed pronatalist messages of the period, the idealized relationship on Valadon’s canvases is open to a much wider range of women while allowing them more independence and choices than the simple dichotomy of marriage versus solitude.
Laurencin: Fashioning the Modern Living Woman Outside of Maternal Fulfillment

If Valadon and Renoir create a world or moment apart in *Young Girl with Cat* and *Mother and Child* through their soft brushwork and bright colors, Marie Laurencin creates on her canvases another dimension. Her ephemeral style imbues her images with fiction and fantasy as her pale, youthful female figures pose in front of amorphous backgrounds of pastel blues, pinks, and greys. Skin so white it resists shading, dark and widely set eyes, small, pink mouths, and long, slim, tapering limbs and torsos define her generic nymphs and muses as well as her maternal figures and even her portraits. According to Perry, Laurencin created a “marketable ‘feminine’ art, inhabited by *femmes-enfants.*”92 But her production of femininity did not end on her canvas. Laurencin was equally invested in the construction of her own identity as painter, promoting the “innocent, child-like” persona of a “quintessentially ‘feminine’” artist.93

Laurencin’s search for a modern femininity, however, goes beyond the saccharine, child-like womanhood in her paintings. Spending most of her adult life in a relationship with a married woman and physically incapable of having children, Laurencin was no traditional woman. In her self-fashioning, a certain alterity showed through as she moved between a conservative feminine style and that of the short-haired, cross-dressing *garçonne* (figs. 4.16 and 4.17). In her work, women rarely adopt maternal roles and, when they do, are often as much Venus as they are Madonna, modern as much as (or rather more than) traditional.94 What is more, the surrogate maternal figures in paintings like *Portrait of Coco Chanel* were well-known contemporary women whose life stories, like her own, did not conform to conservative gender binaries.

93 Ibid.
94 Indeed, Laurencin painted only two direct mother and child images: one entitled *Venus* and the other representing a pair of figures both with haloes.
Through her work, then, Laurencin attempted to represent a new norm. Steeped in a delicate, seemingly naive beauty, her compositions in many ways urge viewers to consider only the surface. A closer look at *Self Portrait with Cat* (ca. 1912) and *Portrait of Coco Chanel* (1923), however, show the ways in which the details of her compositions subvert a simplistic interpretation. In these works, the “mother” is more aloof than in Valadon’s paintings. Though the cat in Laurencin’s self-portrait seems eager for her attention and though the lapdog and white bird in her portrait of Chanel seem to attest to the female figure’s maternal nature and abilities, these women do not themselves show an investment in the mother-child relationship. They do not dote on their “offspring” or wrap them in a loving embrace. Instead, Laurencin’s maternal figures pose dramatically for the viewer while the generic pets seem almost to become accessories to, rather than participants in, their stories. Moreover, though comfortable in their ethereal settings, the women gaze toward the viewer with a directness and purpose that contradict any sense of naiveté or helplessness. Unlike Léger, whose nudes and modern mothers continued to remain separated in his work, or Valadon, who seemed to allow a dissolution of boundaries between single woman and maternal figures, Laurencin paints women who seem in the process of moving beyond any sense of a maternal role. With an aesthetic that immediately reads as über-feminine, Laurencin has opened up a space of subtle subversion. These women, while in possession of maternal abilities, do not need motherhood to prove or fulfill their femininity.

Along with Valadon, Laurencin was one of the few women artists who received a great deal of critical attention during this period. But while artists like Valadon were either praised or criticized for their “vigoros, powerful, and substantial” aesthetic and style, Laurencin was understood as capturing a much more delicate, and feminized, aesthetic. Supposedly, Laurencin
understood the attempt to emulate a masculine style of painting as “insincere” and unable to “represent who she really is.”


So she instead adopted a “dematerialized, coquettish, and voluptuously sentimental” style of painting that allowed her to create images that were “above all, a dream.”

Critics called the women on her canvases “tender and lively,” “flowers just beginning to open.”

Noting that the female figures in her portraits looked so much like her nymphs and muses, critic Marcelle Auclair concluded that “the resemblance [to her sitters] does not come from the exact reproduction of the model’s features, but from the essence of their being,” which included “frivolity, indolence, [and a] childish and inoffensive vanity.”

The title of René Barotte’s article “Marie Laurencin, friend of the fairies,” captures the essence of the critical representation of this artist and her work, and the way in which the first line of this review moves seamlessly from talking about her person to her art further accentuates the way in which critics regarded artist and work to be one and the same: “I have only seen Marie Laurencin once, but I remember all of her *finesse d’esprit*, her delicate subtlety, the enchanting dreamlike quality in her paintings.”

All of this “charm” and “finesse” quickly earned Laurencin the title of “the woman painter of our era,” as her aesthetic and style came to define an ideal of French femininity.


Clipping from *La Liberté*, November 14, 1926, Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand.


One source to cite this title is Courthion, “Panorama,” 3.
In many ways, though, this saccharine aesthetic seems to have covered over something less traditional. As Elizabeth Louise Kahn notes, Laurencin’s “stylized and stylish worldly female” was lauded by critics who “consciously or unconsciously, needed to neutralize a potentially subversive reading of the women in her art.” Indeed, Kahn argues that “the Laurencin woman, with all of her floating identities and auras, is just one more indication of the artist’s intent to both disguise and uncover her lesbian desires.” Though in much of her work, Laurencin plays on a platonic relationship between nymph-like women, between 1918 and 1924, she did paint more overtly eroticized images. In works like *La Danse* (1919) (fig. 4.18), the close embrace of seemingly female pairs does convey an impression of Sapphic love. Taken out of a harsh reality, these figures seem not to have incited strong criticism from a culture so resistant to unconventional femininity. Careful, at times, to style herself in a similarly ephemeral, feminized way, the “enchanting dreamlike quality” of Laurencin’s person and art seem to have allowed her the possibility of exploring unconventional femininities while continuing to enjoy widespread popularity.

A testament to the active role Laurencin paid in creating this artistic identity and self-image, *Self Portrait with Cat* (fig. 4.19) depicts her as a young, graceful, and timeless woman with traditionally feminine qualities. This is a decided contrast to images in which she adopts a more masculinized role: her self-portrait sketch of 1910-16 in which she sports men’s clothing and adopts a masculine stance with arms akimbo or a photograph in which she posed with a bobbed haircut and men’s clothing. In *Self Portrait with Cat*, she omits any hint of masculinity. She also leaves out any emblems of her identity as an artist, instead focusing in on a woman and

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102 Ibid., 146.
cat. The female figure’s hair is in a very long braid that hangs down her right side and she wears a simple dress and sash that do not indicate any specific period of fashion. She holds a small black and white cat (or kitten) in her right arm while her left arm, which seems to have been reworked at some point, curls up in an awkward though delicate gesture, her limp hand nearly touching her own shoulder. The cat looks up at her eagerly with its mouth open as its paws and tail reach up toward her face. The figure of Laurencin, on the other hand, stares out of the composition with large engaging eyes much like Valadon’s female figure in Young Girl with Cat. Yet rather than blushing cheeks or smiling lips, Laurencin’s figure has pale skin and a stoic expression as if unimpressed with what she sees. Though earlier than Léger’s paintings, this image captures similar qualities in the woman it represents: her long dark and wavy hair falls over one shoulder and her features are simplified and vaguely abstracted. Her slim silhouette seems closer to Léger’s mother figure than his nudes, though it does suggest the long, straight profiles that were gaining popularity in modern Parisian fashion. Still, her soft, feminine curves are not obscured and, though slim, she could belong to any era.

Acutely aware of art-historical traditions, Laurencin seems to have incorporated into her image elements of two very different sorts of mother figures: Mary and Venus. The positioning of the cat in the crook of her arm along with her outward-facing pose recall traditional Christian images of Mary holding or presenting the Christ child.103 In Raphael’s The Small Cowper Madonna (c. 1505) (fig. 4.20), for example, Mary similarly holds her Son in the crook of her left arm, her hand just visible as it wraps around his left thigh. Though her other arm rests in her lap and not up by her shoulder and though her focus is soft and directed down to the right, she adopts

103 This is a theme repeated and further exaggerated in a portrait photograph taken of Laurencin around the same time as she created this sketch. In the photo, she not only holds up a cat in a Madonna-like pose, but she also sits, a long modest dress falling to her ankles.
a similar angle toward the viewer as Laurencin’s figure. In some ways, despite the intimacy of her embrace, she also seems detached from her child as she drifts in thought. Still, there is no question of this woman’s fulfillment of her maternal role. The child, much like Laurencin’s cat, reaches toward his mother, even lifting his left foot upwards and in toward her face, clearly at ease and in love. Though symbolically this infant and Laurencin’s cat stand worlds apart, there is an echo in their body language as they engage with the women in these works. Both, in their eagerness to embrace their “mothers,” attest to these women’s maternal identity.

Laurencin’s long hair and left arm, however, seem to recall images of Venus rather than Mary. In both Alexandre Cabanel’s and Adolphe-William Bouguereau’s paintings of Venus (figs. 4.21 and 4.22), this goddess is depicted with similarly long, wavy locks and a hand curled up by her face. Exaggerated even further than the arm in Laurencin’s sketch, this pose elongates the women’s bodies and shows off the curve of their breasts, hips, and waists. While Venus was mother to Cupid, she was of course also the goddess of love and most frequently an excuse to produce culturally acceptable images of sexualized female nudes. So, however, were images of breast-feeding mothers, their bare skin legitimized by their need to suckle their infants. An emphasis on the breast, then, can just as easily underscore a woman’s maternal ability as her sexuality. Indeed, this duality seems rather convenient in the first half of the twentieth century. Legitimized as the wife of Vulcan and mother of Cupid, Venus was at the same time famous for her romantic intrigues and affairs with other gods and even mortals. As Venus Verticordia, she was charged with the protection of chastity, but as Venus Erycina was associated with prostitutes. Moreover, though not closely associated with legends of Venus, her feline companion, as in Valadon’s portraits, could suggest a link to her sexuality. The multiple layers of this goddess’s femininity, then, once again blend the elements thought to divide mothers and
modern women. Further drawing together various aspects of womanhood, visual references to both Venus and Mary combine in Laurencin’s painting the chaste and the sexualized, the Christian and the pagan. The combination of these two women also heightens the emphasis on youth, beauty, timelessness, and even divinity or, perhaps more appropriate to the context of Laurencin’s work, otherworldliness.

At the same time, unlike many representations of Mary and Venus the figure of Laurencin meets the viewer’s gaze and adopts a pet rather than a human child as her companion. In her directness, this woman refuses to be a passive object of the viewer’s gaze. What is more, as the “mother” of a pet rather than an infant, she is released from many of the responsibilities of biological motherhood. Like Valadon, Laurencin chooses a cat, symbol of independence as well as female sexuality. Again, because of her interest in exploring sensuality and sexuality in other of her works, it seems possible that the cat here is an intentional choice, pointing viewers to such themes. Unlike Valadon’s female figures, this woman seems much less devoted to her feline companion, and in this way perhaps takes on even more of the cat’s aloof, untamed personality. Holding the cat up in an almost offhand gesture, she has caught her own hair in the same embrace. Moreover, while the cat seems so engaged with her, she focuses all her attention on interaction with her viewers. Rather than the intimate and comfortable poses in *Young Girl with Cat* and *Louison and Raminou* this self-portrait sketch is clearly posed, a carefully constructed ideal. Moreover, the sheer difference in scale between woman and pet decidedly shifts importance away from the cat and toward Laurencin’s face and hand.

In works like *Self-portrait with Cat*, by embracing the femininity bestowed on women’s artwork in general and her artwork in particular, Laurencin idealizes her identity as an independent childless woman. She takes on the persona assigned to her by critics like Louis
Vauxcelles who insisted that both artist and work combined “an image of vulnerable youth, of a slender adolescent, with that of a playful, flirtatious woman” whose sexuality is “playful” and “childlike” and, therefore, unthreatening.¹⁰⁴ So revered was her artistic (and personal) femininity that critics like Vauxcelles and Salmon even considered it a mark of her quintessential Frenchness.¹⁰⁵ But if she did indeed retain “the miracle of childhood” throughout her life, the supposed ultimate marker of femininity, motherhood, would be out of the question. Where then are voiced concerns about her inability to have children? It seems that Laurencin’s style oversaturated her viewers and critics with certain markers of femininity, including nods to surrogate maternity, allowing her to deflect attention from the ways in which she did not conform to conservative ideals.

As a portrait artist, Laurencin also imparted this oversaturation and legitimization to her representations of well-known women, similarly overlaying any unusual details of their lives with a delicate and almost cartoon-like aesthetic that emphasizes their femininity. In Portrait of Coco Chanel (fig. 4.23), the main female figure reclines in a comfortable chair. One arm is bent up to support her head, while the other drapes down to lay across a small lapdog. Her eyes have a faraway, even glassy look.¹⁰⁶ Half of Chanel’s torso seems bare, though it is likely transparent or white cloth rather than skin. A bright blue toga-like dress drapes over her other shoulder and a long black scarf divides the two sides of her frame. Her dark hair is short, though it is difficult to tell if it is indeed in the style of the bob that Chanel herself helped bring into popularity. Her body is slim and boyish, as per her reputation, and there is hardly indication of breasts. Like the

¹⁰⁵ Cited in ibid., 108 and note 4.
¹⁰⁶ The indifference of her female figures in general was noted in reviews like Marcelle Auclair’s “Marie Laurencin: Portraitiste,” in which she writes, “Toutes les femmes que peint Marie Laurencin sont ainsi capricieuses, détachées de toute utilité, indifférentes aussi.” Auclair “Marie Laurencin: Portraitiste,” 323.
majority of Laurencin’s female figures, this figure has bright white skin, large dark and wide-set eyes, and a light flush of pink on her cheeks that all assert a certain youthfulness. Even more than the image of Laurencin, this depiction of Chanel conforms to the styles of modern times. The rather slim, almost boyish profile that Chanel made popular and the short hair mark her as a femme moderne despite any difficulty in dating the fashion of her dress. In the background patches of pastel pinks, greens, blues, and greys swirl together as a horse or faun leaps in from the right. A white or gray bird dives down toward the female figure’s neck. Again, then, Laurencin applies her ephemeral style to the image of a living woman, bestowing a certain naïve femininity to both work and person.

Coco Chanel, however, was a woman on the cutting edge. Not only did her styles gain more popularity than the fashions of many male designers, but her clothes became synonymous with the modern woman. Slim-cut, fitted silhouettes, slacks, and “little black dresses” all were staples of the Chanel wardrobe. According to biographer Rhonda K. Garelick, Chanel’s boyish garçonne look “helped cement her reputation as the epitome of modernity.”107 The Chanel “uniform,” which included clothes, accessories, perfumes, and the bobbed hairstyle, and which required a specific, slim, boyish body, promised more than a specific “look:” it promised women the ability to step away from traditional womanhood and toward the privileges of masculinity.108 “Freedom,” writes biographer Lisa Chaney, “was in fact the objective of the new look.”109

108 See, for example, Garelick’s discussion, ibid., 289.
Adding to Chanel’s independent persona was her inability to have children.\textsuperscript{110} Instead of the life of a stay-at-home mother, Chanel pursued a more public lifestyle, moving in the social circles of the most prominent artists in the Parisian avant-garde.\textsuperscript{111} Her glamorous lifestyle and her success in a demanding, male-dominated profession as well as her involvement in the artistic avant-garde all placed her in the realm of the modern woman.

Painted in 1923, at the time that Chanel was (unsuccessfully) trying to start a family, the dog and the bird in Laurencin’s portrait and the maternal themes they suggest take on a certain significance, as Laurencin again mixes traits from images of Venus and Mary. Reclining on her chair, her cheek resting on her hand, the image of Chanel recalls Antonio Canova’s famous sculpture of Pauline Bonaparte as Venus Victrix (fig. 4.24). Posed on a chaise longue rather than an armchair, Canova’s female nonetheless sits with her right hand supporting her head and her left arm draped down along her body (even leaving enough room for a small dog to crawl into the composition). The bird diving toward the youthful female figure, however, speaks to the legacy of the Christian Annunciation. In this story, the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive a son by the power of the Holy Spirit, most often represented as a white dove. In representations of this scene by artists like Nicolas Poussin (fig. 4.25), the bird is captured in flight, its wings spread, either just above Mary’s head or diving in from the upper corner of the canvas. In earlier images from illuminated manuscripts and altarpieces, such as Jean Bourdichon’s manuscript leaf from ca. 1485-90 (fig. 4.26), the bird is represented in profile,

\textsuperscript{110} It is possible that an early abortion in 1909 left her infertile or perhaps she simply waited too long. No concrete evidence has been found to support the rumors that Chanel had an abortion in Paris in 1909, but many of her acquaintances have confirmed the story. See Garelick’s explanation, \textit{Mademoiselle}, 51.

\textsuperscript{111} It is important to note here that mothers could choose this lifestyle, too, though most did not. In fact, in addition to well-known personalities like Jean Cocteau (for whom she created the costumes to the 1926 opening of \textit{Orpheus}), Chanel counted mothers like Tamara de Lempicka who hid the existence of her daughter and lived the life of an independent \textit{femme fatale}. 
even more closely resembling the bird in Chanel’s portrait. As it flies toward the figure of Chanel, it suggests a divine testament to this woman’s maternal qualities.  

A maternal figure with the detached look of a modern woman, this representation of Chanel seems to share certain qualities with de Lempicka’s image of modern motherhood. Like the figure in Maternity (fig. 3.2), Laurencin’s Chanel disengages with the viewer. Though she is posed facing outward and though she almost seems to be meeting the viewer’s gaze, her eyes are just slightly averted. It is as if she is aware that she is being watched but refuses to acknowledge any onlooker. Yet her disengagement is markedly different from that of de Lempicka’s figure, who seems to be struggling to fit two different modes of femininity at the same time. Chanel, in contrast, seems to sit more comfortably with one mode of identity. She is not obviously a part of the garçonne culture, and without the stark colors, deep shadows, metallic sheen, or cold crispness of de Lempicka’s painting, all aggression and struggle disappear. It is as if in softening the palette and brushstrokes, Laurencin simultaneously softened the cultural specificity as well as the prescriptions of femininity inherent in de Lempicka’s work. What is more, she not only claims more agency by so nearly engaging the viewer, she is also not stuck in the act of breastfeeding a baby. Adding more to the sense of this figure’s autonomy, the leaping animal in the background could either be a horse (which Laurencin frequently used to represent the freedom of transportation) or a faun (calling up connections with Artemis, the goddess of wild animals and the hunt who loved to dance freely in mountains, forests, and marshes).

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112 It is also important to note here that the pet in Chanel’s lap is a dog, which as seen above had close associations with themes of domesticity and family life. Rather than the independent cat, this figure is responsible for the much more dependent dog, the care of whom was considered much more time-consuming and invested. (See discussion above in the section on Valadon’s figures.)
In both *Self-Portrait with Cat* and *Portrait of Coco Chanel* the presence and attention of the animals act as a testament to the women’s maternal abilities, validating that aspect of their femininity. But the animals in these paintings seem incidental at best, present only to assuage the conservative viewer who expects to see an appropriate nod to motherhood. At the same time, their wide-eyed, youthful faces and slim bodies give them a childlike air, while the pastel palette of the painted portrait insists on an ephemeral aspect that contemporary critics and viewers often understood as highly feminine, regardless of maternal status. The inclusion of details that point back to famous images of Venus and Mary further underscore these women’s connection to a long legacy of femininity. Despite the naivety and youth suggested in these works or the legacy of gender divisions in which they seem to participate, the female figures on these canvases have a certain agency and awareness. Both women adopt body language that acknowledges the presence of the viewer. Their choice to hold pets in these highly posed compositions also implies an awareness of society’s norms and expectations. At the same time, each of the female figures resists a close bond with the animals they hold. Though each disengages in a different way and, seemingly, for a different purpose, the result is the same: these women show that though willing to recognize social mores, they do not need maternity, as French culture so adamantly insisted, to fulfill them as women.

**Conclusion**

Combatting the longstanding negative images of the single woman, Laurencin and Valadon created representations that glorified and idealized women without biological children. Though after the First World War cultural commentators across the political spectrum attempted to come to terms with and even co-opt the single woman, in the vast majority of artistic
representations from this period, women were presented as either the sexualized female nude or the selfless loving mother. This comfortable divide between feminine types was intended to uphold conservative gender norms and to represent a longed-for return to tradition. Unlike the artists in the previous chapter, who rejected the terms of French motherhood by unraveling traditional associations with this role, the artists discussed in this chapter attempted to rewrite (rather than erase) the terms of acceptable roles for French women. Despite his participation in the conservative return to order, Léger nonetheless appears to have attempted a synthesis of these two figures. With *Femmes dans un Intérieur* and *Personnages dans un Jardin* he created compositions that promoted a questioning of traditional maternal roles and opened up possibilities for alternative motherhoods. Going even further than Léger in shifting the terms of French femininity, Laurencin and Valadon placed women in relationship with pets rather than children. The loving women and cats in Valadon’s compositions assume the pose of the breastfeeding pair, emphasizing a surrogate maternal role. As she glorified this alternative, Valadon also opened up more possibilities for ideal femininity. Laurencin similarly presented images of women with their pets, including details that emphasize these women’s maternal capabilities. But her maternal figures are markedly aloof. Preoccupied with the viewer or with their own thoughts, these women seem to declare their independence from motherhood. These women do not need a maternal role to find fulfillment. In these ways, Léger, Valadon, and Laurencin pushed beyond normative bourgeois femininity, beyond the definitions of motherhood offered in the *Monument to French Mothers* or popular culture images like Lebasque’s Peace Loan Poster. Instead, the women on their canvases give visual form to something different, a womanhood beyond the boundaries of biological motherhood or conservative maternal ideals, a womanhood that allows their subjects more freedom and more possibilities.
CONCLUSION

In the spring of 2016, the cosmetics company Sephora mounted an ad campaign for Mother’s Day, *Top Maman: Des cadeaux cool pour toutes les mamans* (“cool presents for all mamas”) (figs. 5.1 and 5.2). Gracing the pages of magazines, posted at numerous bus stops around Paris, a chic *maman* with a canotier-style hat and sleek black dress held a baby wearing only a black and white striped diaper. In two different images, the mother either looked out at viewers or down at her child. In both, the relationship between the two seemed quite different from the doting mother that was so prevalent in early-twentieth-century visual culture.

In one of the two compositions, the mother and baby both face out toward a viewer. In many ways, this image, like the central figure of *Monument to French Mothers* or Laurencin’s self-portrait sketch, recalls Madonna and Child imagery as a young mother holds her child up for viewers to see. At the same time, the way in which these two figures are fashioned brings such an image to the present day and transforms the theme of a self-sacrificing maternal figure. In this representation, the mother holds the baby on the curve of her hip, one perfectly manicured hand wrapping around the child’s thigh. In her other hand she delicately cradles a perfume bottle, her pointer finger resting at the top, poised to spray the scent. Her gaze is down, as if she stands above the viewer, and because of this she seems almost regal and certainly revered. The black dress that hugs her curves nevertheless downplays her body, drawing the focus instead to her arms and face. The bright pink eye shadow above her dark eyes and her blood red lipstick combined with her dark hair and black and white ensemble make her seem rather intimidating,
even dangerous. The pale, blond, blue-eyed baby in her arms hardly seems to fit with her air of a *femme fatale*, even though the black and white stripes on the child’s diaper and pacifier have clearly been designed to match the mother’s style. Indeed, it seems as though the infant has become an accessory: hat on head, perfume in one hand, baby in another. What is more, the large striped pacifier seems almost to deny this child’s biological need for its mother. This baby, with its mouth full, is low-maintenance, allowing the mother plenty of time to spend on her “look.”

In another photograph of the same two models, mother and baby turn toward each other. This time the mother seems interested in engaging more with the child. She grasps the baby’s arm and puckers her lips, assuming a pose that recalls that of Aline, the artist’s mistress and future wife, in Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881) (fig. 5.3). Like Aline, this *maman* is well put together, she wears a fashionable dress and hat and her red lips stand out. Similarly linking this fashionable woman with domesticity, the baby is a fulfillment of her maternal instinct, whereas Aline’s dog only hints at the future possibility of this. At the same time, however, the baby does not appear as sure about their interaction as the mother. Arching subtly backwards the child has an air of pulling away.\(^1\) There is a sense that the mother’s grasp on the baby’s arm is holding her offspring in place. At the same time, the pacifier again comes between them. Clearly still at the age of oral exploration, without the pacifier this baby would likely be sucking on his or her own hands, licking the mother’s chest, or planting a slobbery “kiss” on her chin or cheek. Again, however, the pacifier prevents this, keeping this baby from ruining the mother’s dress or make-up. It also prevents intimacy as it dampens the child’s need for its mother. Both images thus replace the theme of self-sacrificing, doting maternity with a highly stylish, and stylized,

\(^1\) This is, of course, easily explained by the fact that this baby may not (and is likely not) the model’s child. It is significant, however, that this was one of two images selected for the campaign.
independent motherhood. Insisting that a woman need not give up her fashion, her beauty, or her self-care, *Top Maman* attempts to sell carefree maternity as it sells easy-to-apply cosmetics.

Yet what does this say of motherhood in the twenty-first century? Though ephemeral like the advertisements and war posters explored in the first chapter of this study, this image, like the monuments in chapter two, for a time became a part of Paris city streets. As citizens and tourists alike walked or drove to their destinations, stood waiting for a bus or to cross the street, these images were present, even if only in the periphery (fig. 5.4). Unlike advertising images like l’Irium’s toothpaste commercial (fig. 1.28) there is no intimacy or close embrace between mother and child, while unlike the figures in *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* or *Monument to French Mothers* this mother is not an overt glorification of self-sacrificing motherhood linked to supposed national definitions of femininity. As in de Lempicka’s and de Chirico’s work, themes of fashion and display inform the design of Sephora’s advertisements and, in many ways, the highly perfected model seems to teeter on the brink of becoming a perfect, though lifeless, mannequin. While, similar to Valadon’s and Laurencin’s paintings of surrogate mothers, the *Top Maman* images insist on the possibility of a maternal role that allows for female independence. Though they draw on such themes similar to the paintings examined in this study, the *Top Maman* images also push farther; this fashionable maman is able to fulfill her role as biological mother as she elicits a sense of stylish perfection and independence.

In many ways, it thus seems that certain significant shifts have taken place in French notions of motherhood. Certainly, the achievement of French women’s suffrage in 1945 affected cultural expectations and definitions of femininity and maternity, and further transformations continue to occur as women in the workforce and in various positions of power influence the shape of French society. What is more, after the Second World War, France enjoyed a boom in
the birthrate and was able to secure a leading position in European population growth. More recently still, French fathers have become more involved in their children’s lives. Indeed, fathers’ roles have undergone enough of a transformation that by 2011 the *Nouvelle Observateur* was able to publish an article entitled “Les pères en font-ils trop?” (“Do fathers do too much?”). Such significant developments in politics, demographics, and culture suggest the resolution of key components of movements like the feminist push for women’s suffrage as well as prominent early-twentieth-century French fears like that of a dying France, which, in turn, implies a shift in attitudes toward women and their role as mothers.

On January 16, 2018, however, a major news story appeared in numerous, well-circulated periodicals: France’s population is once again in decline. Beginning in 2016, the year of Sephora’s *Top Maman* campaign, births began to drop below replacement level. This trend has now continued long enough that the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (Insee) has issued worrisome conclusions about demographic statistics. “La baisse de la natalité s’accentue dangereusement en France,” declared the headline in *Les Echos*. “Natalité: vers la fin de l’exception française,” read *Le Monde*. The Insee, these articles declared in italics, has found the birthrate to be “historically low.” Not only are there fewer women of childbearing age, but

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there is a drop in fertility in women between the ages of 24 and 35. In fact, this decline in fertility “is more marked than ever before.”

Exploring various hypotheses about the cause of this development, the articles draw out familiar themes. Economic recession (this time in 2008) hit French families hard. The allocations familiales are not what they should be; there is not enough state support for families. Today’s generation pursues their own interests, they are in school longer, they marry later, and they do not think of having children until it is too late. In fact, marriage rates are down. Immigration is not strong enough to help boost population growth. Older generations are dying off and women are not having enough children to replace them. In many ways, these articles could have been written in 1918, rather than 2018. The doubts and issues are not new; the fears of a dying France clearly remained latent during the nation’s decades of growth. What is more, once again the brunt of the problem falls (or is placed) on women’s shoulders. Because demographic statistics average child per woman, they automatically exclude men from the picture. Even more than that, the articles hardly mention men. Certainly a male presence is implied in discussions of marital trends, but for the most part journalists for papers like Le Monde and Les Echos turn their focus away from issues of marriage and toward larger demographic developments, insisting on the need for a rise in the number of children per woman. Much as in the century before, these articles, by positioning dwindling birthrates as a problem of women failing to have enough children, insist that if France is to continue to maintain or expand its population numbers, women must come to their aid.

Within this context, the subject of motherhood again takes on increased importance. Reducing the issue of demographic decline to biological terms, articles like those in Les Échos

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5 Cossardeaux, “La Baisse de la natalité.”
and *Le Monde* as well as organizations like Insee, insist on the need for more women to become mothers, while omitting any investigation of social and political trends that may affect the decision or ability to bear children. At the same time, campaigns like the *Top Maman* ads promote the allure of motherhood, casting it as a glamorous role whose essential qualities are understood and agreed upon by most. Once again the realities of motherhood do not, and indeed cannot, conform to a uniform or universal collective ideal. Noting the connection between fluctuating birthrates and “an evolution in modes of thought (*mentalités*),” a quote from geographer Laurent Chalard of the Sorbonne evokes the importance of a critical look at variations in the ideals, definitions, and realities of motherhood.

As the chapters in this study have shown, each historic and cultural moment in a society brings its own variations to this “timeless” role. The negotiation of issues like class and race and events like war as well as more personal factors like situation, attitude, and personality influence the meaning and expression of motherhood. The themes perpetuated in imagery from the independent mother in Mors Automobiles’ “Nos Artistes en auto” (fig. 1.10) to the devoted breastfeeding mother in Henri Lebasque’s Peace Loan Poster; the political and social issues inherent in monuments like the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch* and *Monument to French Mothers*; the emptiness explored in paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, Tamara de Lempicka, and Francis Picabia; and the possibility of alternatives explored in compositions by Fernand Léger, Suzanne Valadon, and Marie Laurencin all informed and challenged beliefs about motherhood and, by association, French society and culture between 1910 and 1940. Still, they reveal only some of the issues at stake and variations at play in a production of the idea of motherhood. Each representation of motherhood, its political, social, and cultural context, as well as the person
behind the creative vision can reveal different aspects of cultural expectations and trends, social norms, and gender politics, as well as national hopes and fears for the future.

Critical interrogations of the history of French motherhood in visual and textual representations are thus vital. The dearth of historical scholarship on representations of early-twentieth-century French motherhood implies an uncritical consensus about maternity and allows for the illusion of an idyllic past of cultural and social cohesion. The renewal of French fears of population decline as well as the continued idealization of motherhood in sources like the Sephora advertisements, however, attest to the importance of close examination and critique. Revealing the legacy on which modern-day representations are built, a critical exploration of historical representations of and beliefs about motherhood illuminates the restrictions as well as the possibilities of motherhood in past as well as the present.
FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Paul Klenck, *Pétroleuse (Les incendiaires)*, ca. 1870, Print, 20 x 14.5 cm, Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

Figure 1.3: Robert Sigl, “Ce qui fait notre force, a nous autres apôtres, c’est la chasteté, la continence absolue que nous observons, malgré la convoitise masculine toujours posée sur nous!” front cover of L’Assiette au Beurre, September 18, 1909.

Figure 1.4: Henry Bing, “La Nietzscheenne. – Je fais de la peinture, du spiritisme, de la physique, du trombone, de la philosophie et de l’aviation. Le modèle. – Et l’amour, vous n’en faites pas?” L’Assiette au Beurre, 1908.
Figure 1.5: Robert Sigl, “La vierge au miroir: —… Quand je pense que j’aurais pu être mère! …qu’un homme aurait déformé tout ça!... Et pour son seul plaisir!!” *L’Assiette au beurre*, 1908.

Figure 1.6: Robert Sigl, “La vierge forte: --Ju n’irai pas jusqu’à vous dire que ma fille pourra diriger un intérieur ou élever des enfants…Je sais aussi qu’elle n’est pas jolie, jolie…Elle boite un peu…Elle est maigre…sa dot aussi…Mais, soyez tranquille, vous épousez un cerveau!...” *L’Assiette au beurre*, 1908.
Figure 1.7: Robert Sigl, “Soucieuse de développer ses facultés intellectuelles, mais sentant quand même qu'elle doit être mère, la femme future pourra très bien concilier ces deux choses: il lui suffira pour cela de savoir ‘se donner une postérité moins encombrante et moins coûteuse que par le passé.’ (Louise D…: L'Avenir de la Femme.)” L’Assiette au beurre, 1908.

Figure 1.8: M. G. de Conenson, “Notre race en danger: La marche de la population en Europe de 1800 à 1910” graphique indiquant, d’après les statistiques décennales d’une période de cent dix ans, la nombre d’habitants par kilometer carré dans le divers pays.” graph from L'Illustration, July 2, 1910, (highlighting of France’s curve, mine).
Figure 1.9: Georges Lepape, *Le Hochet*, front cover of *Fémina*, January 15, 1914.

Figure 1.10: Mors automobiles, “Nos Artistes en automobile: Madame Cécile Thévenet, la délicieuse ‘Carmen’ de l’Opéra-Comique,” in *L’Illustration*, July 2, 1910.
Figure 1.11: Auguste Roubille, poster design, *Art et décoration: Revue mensuelle del’art moderne* 28 (July-December 1910), 78.

Figure 1.12: Auguste Roubille, cover design for Louise Babet’s *Le Livre des mères*, reproduced in *Art et décoration: Revue mensuelle del’art moderne* 28 (July-December 1910), 80.
Figure 1.13: G. Capon, “La Femme française pendant la guerre,” sponosored by the Section Cinématographique de l’Armée Française, 13 x 19 cm, 1920.

Figure 1.14: G. Douanne, “Soignons la Basse-Cour,” 1914-1918, Comité National de P’evoyance et d’Économies, color lithograph, 56 x 38 cm, Library of Coongress.
Figure 1.15: Victor Prouvé, “Hygiéne de guerre,” 1918, lithograph, poster, 65.5 x 50 cm, Bibliothèque National de France.

Figure 1.16: Gino Severini, *Motherhood*, 1916, Oil ob canvas, 65 x 92 cm, Museo dell’Academia Etrusca, Cortona, Italy.
Figure 1.17: Francisque Poulbot, “Le monument des soldats?...j’y vais aussi,” from Encore des Gosses et les Bonhommes (Paris: Self-published, 1918).

Figure 1.18: Henri Lebasque, L’Emprunt de la Paix, 1920, Lithograph, 114 x 79 cm, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Figure 1.19: Henri Royer, Ligue pour le relèvement de la natalité française et la défense des familles nombreuses, postcard, 1920.
La Française

Journal de Progrès Féminin

Rééditée en chef : Suzanne Balsan

La Convention Internationale pour le Suffrage des Femmes

A la Sorbonne, 30 mai - 6 juin

Figure 1.20: Front page of La Française, May 29, 1926.
Figure 1.21: Beringa, “Quelques congressistes,” *Le Matin*, May 31, 1926.

Figure 1.22: Marcelle Botton, “Ceux qui ne votent pas, ne comptent pas,” *La Française*, June 25, 1932.
Figure 1.23: Detail from central panel of Rogier van der Weyden, *The Last Judgment*, 1446-52, Oil on wood, 215 x 560 cm, Musée de l'Hôtel-Dieu, Beaune.

Figure 1.24: Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Michael Weighing a Human Soul and a Devil*, 1506, Woodblock, first state of two, 24.9 x 14.4 cm, Rijksmuseum.
Figure 1.25: Central portal detail, *The Last Judgement*, 1220-30, stone, Notre Dame de Paris.

Figure 1.26: Phoscao advertisement, published in *Ève*, December 11, 1938.
Figure 1.27: Lait Berna advertisement, published in Ève, December 11, 1938.

Figure 1.28: L’Irium advertisement featuring film star Joan Blondell and her son, published in Ève, May 15, 1938.
Figure 1.29: Paris-Rhône vacuums advertisement, published in *L’Illustration*, January 28, 1939.

Figure 1.30: Pablo Picasso, *Mother and Child*, 1921, Oil on Canvas, 142.9 x 172.7 cm, Art Institute Chicago.
Figure 1.31: Pablo Picasso, *Maternité*, 1921, Museo Picasso, Malaga, Spain.

Figure 1.32: Reproduction of Berthe Morisot’s *La Vasque*, printed in *Le Bulletin de la vie artistique*, July 1, 1921.
Figure 1.33: Félix Rasumny, attr., Commemorative coin for the Éxposition de la maternité et de l’enfance (after Raphael La Vierge à la chaise), Silver-plated bronze, 6 cm, Private collection.

Figure 1.34: Raphael, Madonna della seggiola (Madonna of the Chair), ca. 1513-14, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy.

Figure 1.35: Poster for the Éxposition de la maternité et de l’enfance.
Figure 1.36: Jean Carlu, “Pour le Désarmement de nations,” *La Française* September 10, 1932.

Figure 1.37: Postcard photograph of the 1937 expo, German and Soviet pavilions.
Figure 1.38: A. Dubout, “At the Exposition: once again, these two are the ones fighting,” published in *Candide*, July 15, 1937.
Figure 2.1: Paul Moreau-Vauthier, *The Monument to Madame Marguerite Boucicaut and Baroness Clara de Hirsch*, inaugurated 1914, Marble, Paris, France, photograph author.

Figure 2.2: Henri Bouchard and Alexandre Descatoire, *The Monument to French Mothers*, inaugurated 1936, d'Euvre Stone, Paris, France, Photograph author.
Figure 2.3: Paul Moreau-Vauthier, *La Parisienne*, 1900.

Figure 2.4: Detail of *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, 1914, photograph author.
Figure 2.5: Detail of the young, anonymous mother figure in the *Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, 1914, photograph author.

Figure 2.6: Detail of de Hirsch’s face,  
Figure 2.7: Detail of Boucicaut’s face,  
*Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, 1914.  
*Monument to Boucicaut and de Hirsch*, 1914.
Figure 2.8: Unknown photographer, Marguerite Boucicaut, 19th century.

Figure 2.9: Unknown photographer, Baroness Clara de Hirsch, 19th century.
Figure 2.10: Paul Poiret, “La Perse,” 1911, Cotton, silk, metallic thread, fur, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 2.11: “Women’s Fashion,” Au Bon Marché catalogue, Winter 1912.
Figure 2.12: “Clothes for boys and men,” *Au Bon Marché* catalogue, Winter 1912.

Figure 2.13: Detail of central grouping, *Monument to French Mothers*, 1938, photograph author.
Figure 2.14: Detail of mother figures to the left of the central group, *Monument to French Mothers*, 1938, photograph author.

Figure 2.15: Detail of mother figures to the right of the central group, *Monument to French Mothers*, 1938, photograph author.
Figure 2.16: Detail of figural “types” to left of the central group, *Monument to French Mothers*, 1938, photograph author.

Figure 2.17: Detail of figural “types” to the right of the central group, *Monument to French Mothers*, 1938, photograph author.
Figure 2.18: Emilie Rolez, *La Veuve: Monument aux Morts*, Equeurdreville-Hainneville (La Manche, Normandie), 1932.

Figure 2.19: Auguste Carli, *Monument aux morts*, 1924, Nîmes (Languedoc-Roussillon), postcard photograph of monument, ca. 1924.
Figure 2.20: Detail, M. Hoeuw, *Monument aux morts*, Bapaume (Pas-de-Calais), 1925.

Figure 2.21: Alexandre Descatoire, *La Jeunesse*, (Esplanade of the Palais de Chaillot), 1937.
Figure 2.22: Henri Bouchard, *Maternité en Bois*, 1919, wood, 56 x 16 cm, Musée de la Piscine, Roubaix.

Figure 2.23: Henri Bouchard, *Madame Bouchard et ses trois enfants*, 1923, bronze, 51 x 33 cm, Musée de la Piscine, Roubaix.
Figure 2.24: Detail of nurse, *Monument to French Mothers*, 1938.

Figure 2.25: The crowd as pictured in *Le Matin*, front page, October 24, 1938.
Figure 3.1: Giorgio de Chirico, *The Painter’s Family*, 1926, Oil on Canvas, 11464 x 1149 mm, Tate, London.

Figure 3.2: Tamara de Lempicka, *Maternity*, 1928, Oil on Canvas, 35 x 27 cm, Barry Humphries Collection, Australia.
Figure 3.3: Francis Picabia, *Mother and Child*, 1939-40, Oil on Panel, 100.5 x 84 cm, Private Collection.

Figures 3.4 and 3.5: Tailors dummies, ca. 1940 and 1920.

Figure 3.7: Max Klinger, *Crucifixion*, 1890, Oil on Canvas, 251 x 465 cm, Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig.
Figure 3.8: Pablo Picasso, *Maternity*, 1905, Private Collection.

Figure 3.10: Anonymous, *L’Inconnue de la Seine*, ca. 1898-1900, Plaster, 311 x 22 x 16 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Figure 3.11: José Simont, “The Wanton Barbarism of the Zeppelin: After an Air Raid,” *The Illustrated London News*, February 12, 1916.
Figure 3.12: “A moi, maman j’ai très faim!” Elesca: exquis déjeuner lacté reconsituant complet,” ève: La Revue Féminine Idéale, December 11, 1939, 28.
Figure 4.1: Léger, *The City*, 1919, Oil on canvas, 231.1 x 298.4 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Figure 4.2: Fernand Léger, *Le Grand Déjeuner*, 1921-22, Oil on canvas, 182 x 248 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Figure 4.3: Léger, *La Mère et l’enfant (chien sous table)*, 1920, Oil on canvas, 92 x 64.5, Private collection, Zurich.

Figure 4.4: Léger, *La Femme et l’enfant (La mère et l’enfant)*, 1922, Oil on canvas, 171.2 x 240.9 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel.
Figure 4.5: Léger, *Femmes dans un Intérieur*, 1921, Oil on canvas, 64.5 x 92 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

Figure 4.6: Manet, *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, 1863, Oil on canvas, 208 x 264.5 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
Figure 4.7: Léger, *Personnages dans un Jardin*, 1922, Oil on canvas, 65 x 92 cm, Galerie Simon, Paris, France.

Figure 4.8: Léger, *Personnages devant un Jardin*, 1922, Oil on canvas, 65 x 92 cm, Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris.
Figure 4.9: Léger, *Sketch (Study for Personnages devant un Jardin)*, 1922, pencil, 23.5 x 31.2 cm, Private Collection.

Figure 4.10: Suzanne Valadon, *Young Girl with Cat*, 1919, Oil on canvas, 65.4 x 54 cm, Private Collection.
Figure 4.11: Suzanne Valadon, *Louison and Raminou*, 1920, Oil on canvas, 61 x 50.2 cm, Private Collection.

Figure 4.12: Auguste Renoir, *Maternité (Femme allaitant son enfant)*, 1886, Oil on canvas, 74 x 54 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida.
Figure 4.13: Auguste Renoir, *Sleeping Girl with Cat*, 1880, Oil on canvas, 120.3 x 92 cm, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Figure 4.14: Valadon, *Reclining Nude*, 1928, Oil on canvas, 60 x 80.6, Robert Lehman Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 4.15: Suzanne Valadon, *Catharine Reclining Nude on a Panther Skin*, 1923, Oil on canvas, 65 x 92 cm, Private Collection.

Figure 4.16: Marie Laurencin, Self-portrait sketch, 1910-16.
Figure 4.17: Talbot, Marie Laurencin, ca. 1910, Silver gelatin print, 7.5 x 5.5 cm, Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand.

Figure 4.18: Marie Laurencin, *La Danse*, 1919, Oil on canvas, 147 x 92.4 cm, Private Collection.
Figure 4.19: Laurencin, *Self Portrait with Cat*, ca. 1912, Charcoal on paper, 28 x 23 cm, Private collection.

Figure 4.20: Raphael, *The Small Cowper Madonna*, c. 1505, Oil on panel, 59.5 x 44 cm, National Gallery of Art.
Figure 4.21: Alexandre Cabanel, *Venus*, 1863, Oil on canvas, 130 x 225 cm, Musée d’Orsay.

Figure 4.22: Adolphe-William Bouguereau, *Naissance de Vénus*, 1879, Oil on canvas, 300 x 215 cm, Musée d’Orsay.
Figure 4.23: Marie Laurencin, *Portrait of Mademoiselle Chanel*, 1923, Oil on Canvas, 92 x 73 cm, Musée de l’Orangerie, Paris, France.

Figure 4.24: Antonio Canova, *Pauline Bonaparte as Venus Victrix*, 1805-08, Marble, 92 x 160 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome.
Figure 4.25: Nicolas Poussin, *Annunciation*, 1657, Oil on canvas, 104.3 x 103.1, National Gallery, London.

Figure 4.26: Jean Bourdichon, Manuscript leaf with Annunciation from a Book of Hours, ca. 1485- Tempera and shell gold on parchment, 90, 9.6 x 6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 5.1: Sephora, *Top Maman: des cadeaux cool pour toutes les mamans*, catalogue cover, 2016.

Figure 5.2: Sephora, *Top Maman: des cadeaux cool pour toutes les mamans*, poster, 22 x 29 cm, 2016.
Figure 5.3: Auguste Renoir, *Le déjeuner des canotiers*, 1881, oil on canvas, Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 5.4: Sephora, *Top Maman: des cadeaux cool pour toutes les mamans*, 2016, bus stop, rue de Tolbiac, Paris, France, photograph author.
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