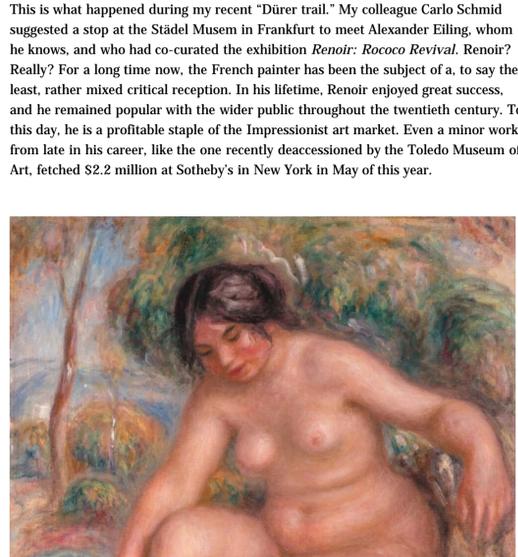


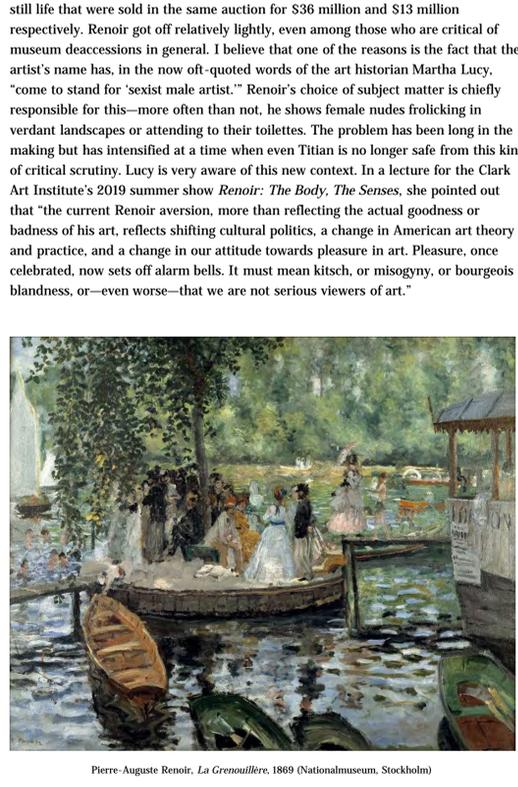
## Distraction / Abwechslung

13 July 2022

Given the abundance of the art world's offerings, one often tends to seek out exhibitions that fit one's specific interests—my *Abwechslung* last week was surely proof of that. Sometimes, however, happenstance or a personal acquaintance can serve as encouragement to go and see a show one might otherwise never have visited. Sometimes, such adventurous excursions result in excitingly new perspectives on a subject that, for whatever reason, one had never paid much attention to or might even have actively avoided.

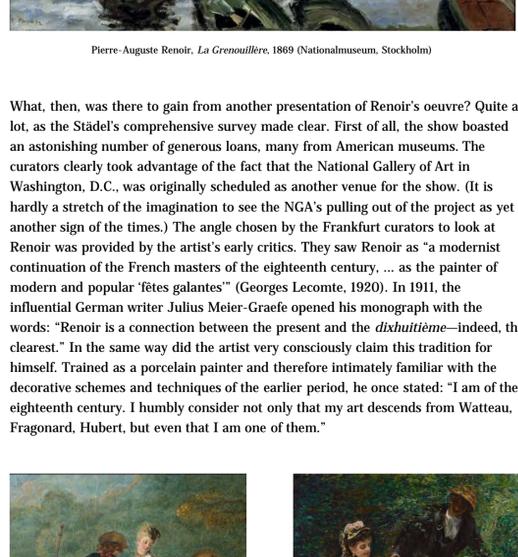


This is what happened during my recent "Dürer trail." My colleague Carlo Schmid suggested a stop at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt to meet Alexander Eiling, whom he knows, and who had co-curated the exhibition *Renoir: Rococo Revival*. Renoir? Really? For a long time now, the French painter has been the subject of a, to say the least, rather mixed critical reception. In his lifetime, Renoir enjoyed great success, and he remained popular with the wider public throughout the twentieth century. To this day, he is a profitable staple of the Impressionist art market. Even a minor work from late in his career, like the one recently deaccessioned by the Toledo Museum of Art, fetched \$2.2 million at Sotheby's in New York in May of this year.



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Nu s'essuyant*, 1912 (formerly Toledo Museum of Art)

Not surprisingly, the museum's decision to sell paintings from its collection created some controversy, but most of it was focused on a Cezanne landscape and a Matisse still life that were sold in the same auction for \$36 million and \$13 million respectively. Renoir got off relatively lightly, even among those who are critical of museum deaccessions in general. I believe that one of the reasons is the fact that the artist's name has, in the now oft-quoted words of the art historian Martha Lucy, "come to stand for 'sexist male artist.'" Renoir's choice of subject matter is chiefly responsible for this—more often than not, he shows female nudes frolicking in verdant landscapes or attending to their toilettes. The problem has been long in the making but has intensified at a time when even Titian is no longer safe from this kind of critical scrutiny. Lucy is very aware of this new context. In a lecture for the Clark Art Institute's 2019 summer show *Renoir: The Body, The Senses*, she pointed out that "the current Renoir aversion, more than reflecting the actual goodness or badness of his art, reflects shifting cultural politics, a change in American art theory and practice, and a change in our attitude towards pleasure in art. Pleasure, once celebrated, now sets off alarm bells. It must mean kitsch, or misogyny, or bourgeois blandness, or—even worse—that we are not serious viewers of art."



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *La Grenouillère*, 1869 (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm)

What, then, was there to gain from another presentation of Renoir's oeuvre? Quite a lot, as the Städel's comprehensive survey made clear. First of all, the show boasted an astonishing number of generous loans, many from American museums. The curators clearly took advantage of the fact that the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., was originally scheduled as another venue for the show. (It is hardly a stretch of the imagination to see the NGA's pulling out of the project as yet another sign of the times.) The angle chosen by the curators to look at Renoir was provided by the artist's early critics. They saw Renoir as "a modernist continuation of the French masters of the eighteenth century, ... as the painter of modern and popular 'fêtes galantes'" (Georges Lecomte, 1920). In 1911, the influential German writer Julius Meier-Graefe opened his monograph with the words: "Renoir is a connection between the present and the *dixhuitième*—indeed, the clearest." In the same way did the artist very consciously claim this tradition for himself. Trained as a porcelain painter and therefore intimately familiar with the decorative schemes and techniques of the earlier period, he once stated: "I am of the eighteenth century. I humbly consider not only that my art descends from Watteau, Fragonard, Hubert, but even that I am one of them."

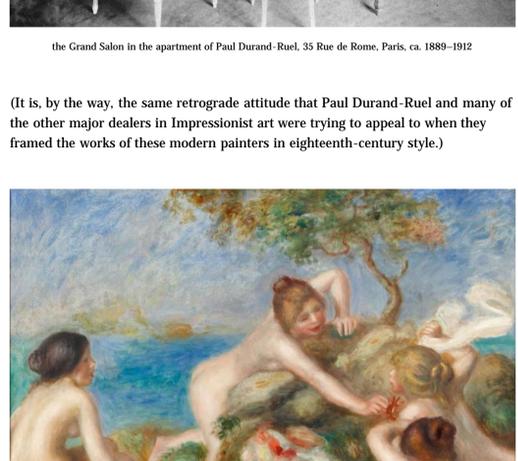


Antoine Watteau, *The Embarkation for Cythera* (detail), 1717 (Musée du Louvre, Paris)



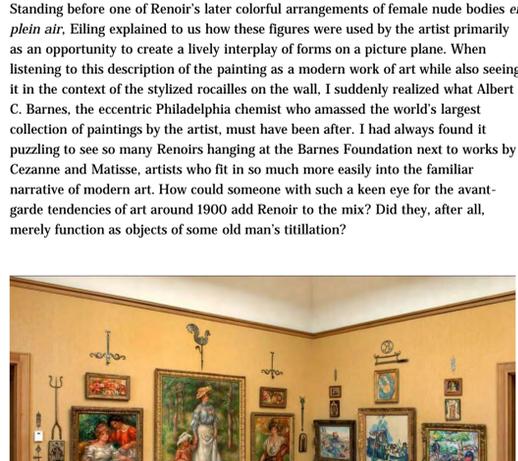
Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *La Promenade*, 1870 (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles)

By pairing Renoir's work with the earlier masters he so much admired, the Frankfurt exhibition did a superb job of representing its central premise without recourse to lengthy labels.



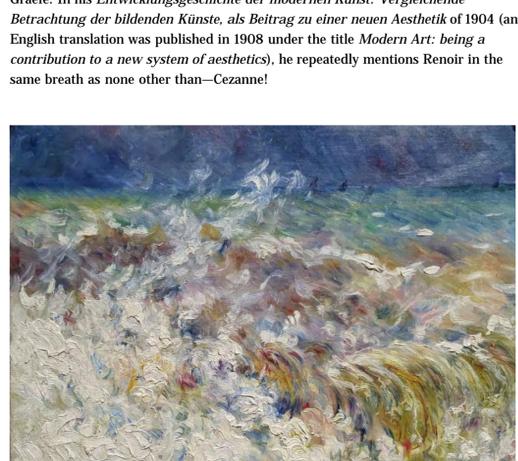
the last room of the Renoir exhibition at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt/Main

The show's last room was devoted, among other things, to Renoir's decorative projects. Accordingly, some of its walls were tastefully embellished with stenciled Rococo ornaments to discreetly evoke the type of interiors preferred by the admirers of the eighteenth century who were also among Renoir's most avid collectors.



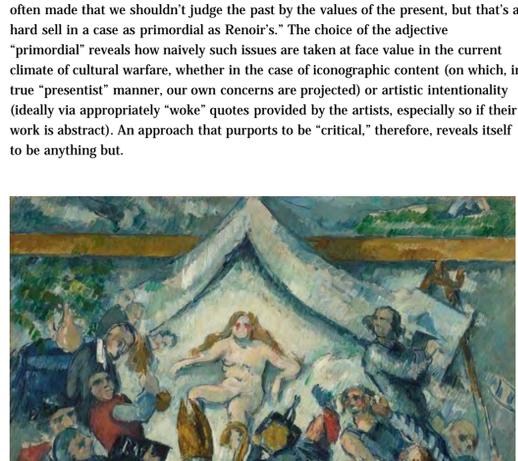
the Grand Salon in the apartment of Paul Durand-Ruel, 35 Rue de Rome, Paris, ca. 1889-1912

(It is, by the way, the same retrograde attitude that Paul Durand-Ruel and many of the other major dealers in Impressionist art were trying to appeal to when they framed the works of these modern painters in eighteenth-century style.)



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Bathers with Crab*, 1890s (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh)

Standing before one of Renoir's later colorful arrangements of female nude bodies *en plein air*, Eiling explained to us how these figures were used by the artist primarily as an opportunity to create a lively interplay of forms on a picture plane. When listening to this description of the painting as a modern work of art while also seeing it in the context of the stylized rocailles on the wall, I suddenly found what Albert C. Barnes, the eccentric Philadelphia chemist who amassed the world's largest collection of paintings by the artist, must have been after. I had next found it puzzling to see so many Renoirs hanging at the Barnes Foundation along to works by Cezanne and Matisse, artists who fit in so much more easily into the familiar narrative of modern art. How could someone with such a keen eye for the avant-garde tendencies of art around 1900 add Renoir to the mix? Did they, after all, merely function as objects of some old man's titillation?



a room in the original setting of the Barnes Foundation in Merion, PA

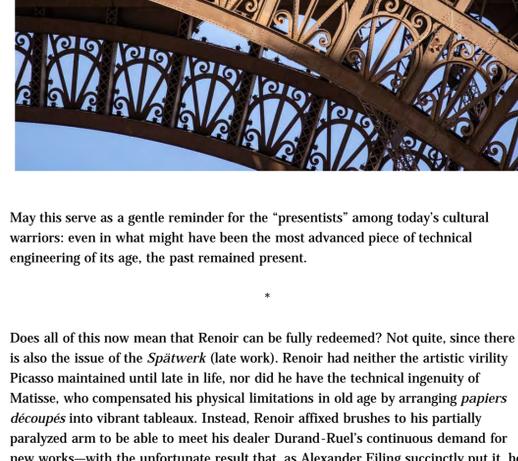
Again, one can find some answers in the writings of such early critics as Meier-Graefe. In his *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst: Vergleichende Betrachtung der bildenden Künste, als Beitrag zu einer neuen Aesthetik* of 1904 (an English translation was published in 1908 under the title *Modern Art: being a contribution to a new system of aesthetics*), he repeatedly mentions Renoir in the same breath as none other than—Cezanne!



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *The Wave*, 1882 (Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis, TN)

Crucial for Barnes was the influence of John Dewey, and the collection essentially functioned as an intrinsic part of the philosopher's highly didactic concept of a "school of seeing," as formulated in Dewey's 1934 study *Art and Experience*. Both Barnes and Dewey must have seen an interplay of artistic material in Renoir's work that, for them, was not that different from the painterly mark-making of Cezanne and Matisse. "Gestural brushwork that takes on a life of its own, independent of the object it depicts"—to quote from the label for Renoir's 1882 painting *La Vague*, perhaps the most astounding work in the Frankfurt show.

Today, we still accept such a formalist approach when it comes to Cezanne and Matisse, but not with Renoir. His subjects, after all, are naked bodies—subjects, therefore, that are so much less "acceptable" than landscape and still life. It seems as if even after a century of abstract art, we, as viewers, just cannot help falling into this "iconographic trap." The problem is further compounded by the fact that these are female nudes painted by a male painter. As Peter Schjeldahl writes: "An argument is often made that we shouldn't judge the past by the values of the present, but that's a hard sell in a case as primordial as Renoir's." The choice of the adjective "primordial" reveals how naively such issues are taken at face value in the current climate of cultural warfare, whether in the case of iconographic content (on which, in true "presentist" manner, our own concerns are projected) or artistic intentionality (ideally via appropriately "woke" quotes provided by the artists, especially so if their work is abstract). An approach that purports to be "critical," therefore, reveals itself to be anything but.



Paul Cezanne, *The Eternal Feminine*, ca. 1877 (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles)

One hardly ever finds Cezanne's paintings described as "weird," "gauche," or as outright "badly painted," and if those adjectives are used (as they daringly are by Judith H. Dobrynski in a thought-provoking review of the major Cezanne retrospective currently on view at the Art Institute of Chicago), those judgments are, not surprisingly, reserved exclusively for his figure paintings.

We might gain something if we were to make an effort to understand what it was that attracted early modernists not only to Cezanne but also to the much-maligned Renoir. (Both Matisse and Picasso, by the way, were avid collectors of his work.) Perhaps even those wrought-iron decorations displayed among the paintings all over the galleries in the Barnes Foundation might then begin to make sense.



Alfred Barnes's idiosyncratic presentation has been more or less maintained in the Barnes Foundation's new home on Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin Parkway (merely the colorful exit signs are missing)

Could they be, perhaps, in a highly abstracted way, an expression of Barnes's idiosyncratic understanding of historical context and therefore function as distant echoes of those *rocailles* in the salons of Paris? When reviewing the Renoir show for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the art historian Stefan Trinks made an even more daring associative leap. He suggested a conceptual connection between the architectural pergolas that were a staple of French gardens (and were often recreated *en miniature* as centerpieces for table decorations) ...



... and the Eiffel Tower:



May this serve as a gentle reminder for the "presentists" among today's cultural warriors: even in what might have been the most advanced piece of technical engineering of its age, the past remained present.

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Does all of this now mean that Renoir can be fully redeemed? Not quite, since there is also the issue of the *Spätwerk* (late work). Renoir had neither the artistic virility Picasso maintained until late in life, nor did he have the technical ingenuity of Matisse, who compensated his physical limitations in old age by arranging *papiers découpés* into vibrant tableaux. Instead, Renoir affixed brushes to his partially paralyzed arm to be able to meet his dealer Durand-Ruel's continuous demand for new works—with the unfortunate result that, as Alexander Eiling succinctly put it, he managed "to paint himself out of art history."

