

Paris's past passion for fashion

L'Impressionisme et la mode (Impressionism and Fashion)

Musée d'Orsay, 75343 Paris
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Reviewed by Cynthia Rose

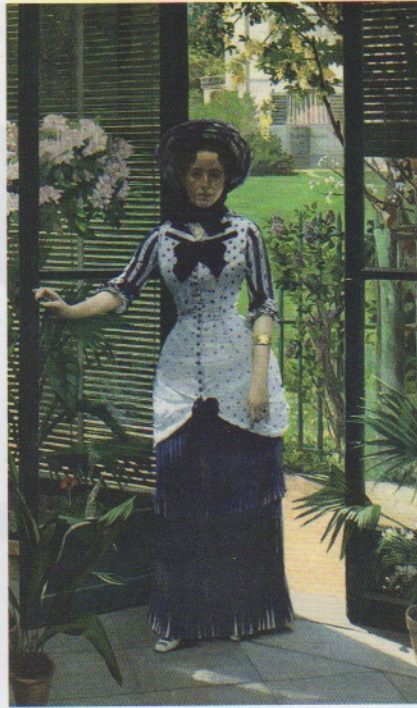
Many of the works in *L'Impressionisme et la mode* are key Impressionist paintings rarely seen together. This hyperbolic staging by opera director Robert Carsen sets 60 key works against fashions from the era. Carsen's *mise en scène* runs from crimson drawing-rooms (filled with gilded chairs) to *plein air* paintings hung over Astroturf. It is the clothes, however, that manage to steal the show.

At the heart of the exhibit is a fresh take on Impressionism. It emphasises how the genre, while radical as art, is inseparable from the birth of bourgeois Paris. During the two decades which preceded it, the French capital doubled in population not once but twice. Plus, in the Impressionist era, most Parisians had more money, more ways to spend it and more places to see and be seen.

Their era's civic life was in overdrive. Enhanced by public lighting, Haussmann's grand boulevards made exploring Paris a safe and modish activity. New railway stations encouraged travel and brought in tourists. Cafés, restaurants and theatres were everywhere – while the first department stores were transforming consumption. All this re-configured much of social life and, like most Parisians, the Impressionists felt engulfed by 'the modern'.

Fashion was the most pervasive symbol of such modernity. In France, its industries boomed, led by such go-getters as silk merchant C. J. Bonnet, luggage king Louis Vuitton and couturier Charles Frederick Worth. Helpfully, new sales initiatives and new money had combined to make women change their clothes throughout the day. Even middle-class Parisiennes participated, moving from *déshabillé* (undress) to special robes, then adding corsets and crinolines under 'day wear'. Come afternoon, the women donned *peignoirs* or tea gowns. Dinner or evening dress was even more elaborate – with low necklines and, for

Right: *In the Greenhouse*, Albert Bartholomé, oil on canvas, 2.33 x 1.42 m, 1881
Below: dress worn by Madame Bartholomé in Albert Bartholomé's painting *In the Greenhouse*, anonymous, 1880



great occasions, bare shoulders.

All these rituals were much discussed and analysed. From the mid-19th century into the 20th, fashion remained at the centre of French creative writing. Authors such as Balzac, Zola, Proust and Baudelaire contemplated all the different roles it played in life.

To them, its constant innovation mirrored urban restlessness. Many such writers felt fashion reflected the consequences, which they saw as heady excitement shadowed by dislocation. Many avant-garde critics hailed Impressionist painters for discovering the visual poetry of their time.

In deciding to paint their everyday world, the Impressionists became default recorders of style. Unlike Salon painters or society portraitists, they were trying to capture the moment and the play of light. But light was equally important in the fashion world, where it had to be considered by designers and textile makers. The fanciest couture houses even had special rooms where clients could be shown new creations by 'night light'. Most Impressionist artists also had human ties to fashion.

Both Renoir's parents, for example, made clothes for a living and he eventually married a couturière. Others lived with, painted and married fashion workers.

La mode was omnipresent in illustration, too, where a deluge of fashion plates and drawings depicted the up-to-date. Presented in codified 'everyday' settings, these were made to showcase the details of dress. Yet their best illustrators (such as the Colin sisters) had close ties to the finer arts through family. The influence their compositions exerted on the Impressionists is a fascinating part of the show. Three little-see Cézannes were copied straight from fashion plates and two are on show here – next to their sources.

In fact, the exposition reveals fashion's entire industrial context: the photos, adverts and articles that sold these gowns, hats and smalls. It's worth a trip just to see the many *cartes de visite*, since most of the photo calling cards are by their inventor, Disdéri.

Not all the art is by Impressionists. Many works come from such academic painters as Carolus-Duran, James (Jacques) Tissot or Alfred Stevens. They used fashion either to convey status, flatter important sitters or set up sentimental scenes. Although their attention to dress was indeed meticulous, these works have very little to do with Impressionism. Even at the time, such painters were lampooned as 'costumers'.

Catchy aphorisms also paper the walls of the show, taken from such sources as Zola, Baudelaire and Emmeline Raymond. Baudelaire was perhaps the era's pre-eminent critic. But Raymond, who created *La Mode Illustrée* (and worked as Paris correspondent for *Godey's Lady's Book*) had very commercial reasons to flack Paris fashion. The era's big thinkers did extol la Parisienne, yet the show's blitz of quotes about her sounds like a gushy blog. Such maxims may have shaped views of Impressionism, but the exposition is confused by this many sidebars. Its one flaw is the lack of a clear and central summary.

Nevertheless, the exhibit's value is immense. Only one costume in it was actually painted. Yet the colours and textures – almost none of which are visible in our world – show us exactly what the Impressionists saw. Here are the very floating muslins so loved by Renoir, the very rustling silks whose sheen seduced Manet. As viewers, we could hardly be more removed from the kinds of social change these artists confronted. Thus the strength of *L'Impressionisme et la mode* is that, just like the painters, it addresses us through our senses. Coaxing our visceral perceptions back to their universe helps us regain not just their daring but its depth. Cynthia Rose is a journalist and broadcaster based in Paris and London

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