

2022

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Recommended Citation

Carpenter, Stephanie (2022) "A Hawker's Guide to the Musee de l'Orangerie: or, Paris as You See It," *Nelle*: Vol. 5, Article 31.

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Stephanie Carpenter

A HAWKER'S GUIDE TO THE MUSÉE DE L'ORANGERIE: OR, PARIS, AS YOU SEE IT

Scene: A sun-bleached sky above the Place de la Concorde, that traffic circle of tremendous proportions. The Place's twenty-one acres of concrete make a heat island on a record-breaking mid-July day, of some summer other than 2020.

Crowds move from the Concorde Metro toward the Champs-Élysées, the Jardin des Tuileries, the various monuments (fountains, obelisk, statues) of the Place itself. At the southeast corner, a line of visitors wraps around the side of the Musée de l'Orangerie. The visitors open and close parasols against the scorched sky; they shuffle their feet on the buff-colored gravel. They fan themselves. They wait.

HAWKER: Madames, Monsieurs, welcome to Paris, the cradle of Impressionism, the bassinette of post-Impressionism, the city of light. In summer we become also a city of lines, and could I interest you in a memento of *this* queue? Just look at all the Eiffel Towers I bring for you—towers of every color and size! (SOUND OF PLASTIC OBJECTS RATTLING) Your choice, Monsieur: two for €1. Ah, *merci*. (SOUND OF COINS CLINKING)

But I can see from Madame's expression that she is more discriminating. She is tired already of such trinkets and their peddlers; she is disgruntled by these long lines and she will not be distracted. Had you imagined Paris differently, Madame? You could have bought advance tickets, of course, to the Louvre or Notre Dame (well . . .), or this, our dear Orangerie. Had you bought in advance you, too, would

now have a fast pass to the head of the line—just as at your Disneyland, no?

The comparison makes you wince; *pardonne-moi*. I should have guessed that Madame was no Mouseketeer. I should have seen at once that yours is the face of a true art-lover, a *connaisseur*. And maybe, *connaisseur* that you are, you came to l'Orangerie in hopes that it would feel like the greenhouse it once was: a refuge in the city, filled with peace and light. (SOUND OF BIRDSONG) Well, I will do what I can to make it seem so. If you will not have a Tower, why not at least buy your audio tour from me, bypass one segment of this terrible line? Inside such tours will be €3, but for you, Madame, €2—a fraction of the price!

What's that? Have I any credentials? Am I really *French*?

You Americans with your citizenship questions, even here where you are a guest! Others might take offense at such interrogations, such—how do you say?—*paranoïa xénophobe*? But I hear your exasperation, Madame; I hold no grudges. I see how this heat has affected your judgement and—ah, you reach at last for your *pac fannie*! Madame is practical as well as fashionable, in an ironic, post-80s way, *non*? And you have supplied your own earbuds, of course.

Now, will you please step please through the lobby, past the gift shop (only for now!) and through the vestibule. When you are ready, key in the desired number and I will be with you again, your guide.

(CROWD NOISES: SQUALLING CHILDREN, CONVERSATIONS IN VARIOUS LANGUAGES, A TICKET TRANSACTION IN ENGLISH. THE BEEP OF A BUTTON PRESSED)

So we begin! With—

1 Claude Monet, *Les Nymphéas*, 1920–26

Filling the two oval galleries of the museum's main floor, just now being miniaturized by dozens of prohibited cameras, you find *Les Nymphéas*—The *Waterlilies*. Of course you have seen these scenes before, if not in museums then on t-shirts, mousepads, coffee mugs. But here you find his lilies shaped with broader strokes, on huge canvases curved to hold the viewer. Here you see them almost *en plein air*, mounted as Monet insisted beneath a diffused glass ceiling that admits natural light. This room was built to his specifications, to hold his gift to the people; it was rebuilt after taking mortars during the liberation of Paris. See how the other viewers document their experience, slowly tracing his panoramas with their phones. Hit pause if you would like to do the same.

Note as you make your own circuit the suggestion of cataracts in some of these paintings: not falls of water but curtains between self and sun. By 1923 Monet couldn't tell browns from blues without reading his paint tubes—and he couldn't read his paint tubes. Surgeries had already destroyed Mary Cassatt's clouded sight, ending her career. Monet surely thought of her as he considered his doctor's offers, but maybe he thought also of the Great War and what it had done to so many. Maybe he considered his possible suffering against his potential to ease others'. He let surgeons skin his left eye; he put on thick glasses and his vision changed. The same pond, the same flowers, rendered afterward in electric hues. Paintings meant to urge us forth from behind our own curtains, to a place where through looking we might be healed.

Magnifique, no? These water lilies came to us in 1926, after their maker's death. Monet painted them to commemorate the war's end, yet he could not bring himself to part with these, his last works. Can you fault him for such

an attachment? The rest of our tour will consider a more complicated bequeathal. To learn about Paul and Domenica Guillaume—Monsieur an important art dealer and Madame, his widow, the donor of this collection—please press 2.

That's 2, on your keypad between 1 and 3.

...

Will you really not, Madame? Do you not care about where this art came from, and how? They were common folk who reinvented themselves, these Guilloumes. Madame was a social climber from the South before her Paul married and renamed her, making "Domenica" out of a girl who'd been baptized a mere "Juliette." Monsieur was a working-class kid with a hunger for the arts. They were two "Ragged Dicks" in the mythology of your own country . . . but it's true that their story is not entirely uplifting. And you came here seeking tranquility, I think, hoping to elevate this Anthropogenic afternoon. Paris has always meant "romance" to you, or "beauty"—yes, I see your guilty smile. Perhaps, then, you had better *not* hear the rumors about Domenica, the suspicions that Paul's death at 43 was not natural, that her second husband's demise was also not the accident it seemed. About her treatment of her adopted son, I think it is best to say nothing at all. So! since you will not press 2, why not press 3, and begin to move at your own pace through this very *long* corridor of Renoirs.

Here you find the lushness you've been looking for, with examples of all of Renoir's specialties: Claude Jr. in a clown suit, tumbling bouquets of flowers, so much ripe fruit!, and so many women with lolling necks. Could any of Renoir's women hold their chins at a level? Or did their round pink cheeks tip them permanently off-kilter? Not even his young girls have their heads on straight—look how those two contort themselves at the piano bench, their red lips parted. Renoir, Renoir . . . I will not trouble you with stories about

the artist and these vacant ladies, his models. You can guess those plotlines, I'm sure. Instead, why don't you take this time to look for yourself, appreciate what he's doing with his brushwork and his shading, his sensual gaze, his shadows filled with light. Form your own *impression* of him, as it were.

I will wait for you ahead; I'm just going to do a few shoulder rolls, a little cat-cow. Renoir's poses, they compress the spine, *non*? And the throat chakra, too, the center of expression, sometimes needs to be opened. When you're ready, please join me as we breathe in through our noses and out through our mouths, no extra charge. Let's face Renoir and exhale fully, eyes wide, tongues extended. (LOUD EXHALE: HAAAAAAA!) Find our Lion's Pose, hold it—good—and then: let us move on.

4–5 Paul Cézanne, *Portrait of Madame Cézanne*, 1890

Is it yogic release or rather, elation!, that you feel in the presence of Cézanne's vibrant hues, his paint-slathered canvases? Did I say vibrant? More than that: his works seem to *vibrate* in their frames. Here are peaches to fur your tongue, landscapes that swirl you toward their raw centers—and two of his 27 portraits of Madame Cézanne, the former Marie-Hortense Fiquet.

What Cézanne liked about his wife was that she knew how to sit still. He picked her up in '69, at art school, where he'd gone to become famous and she'd gone to become a model. The future Madame Cézanne had a nice bland face, like a canvas before it takes the paint. She could hold the same pose for six hours and more. I can't marry you quite yet, *mon petite* blank, Cézanne would say, as he counted the allowance from his art-hating papa. Just keep quiet for a few years more. And could you keep little Paul quiet, too? He'd stopped loving Marie-Hortense before they tied the knot in '86, but he kept on loving her plain, placid features.

“My wife likes only Switzerland and lemonade,” Cézanne said. My wife is an idiot, he meant. With no interference from her personality, his portraits could be about what *he* valued: color, form, temporality. “He is the father of us all,” said Matisse, said Picasso. But, as you can see, *she* was the mother: Madame Cézanne from whom issued so many calm, expressionless women.

You frown, Madame—not like our placid friend. Her story displeases you? Let me remind you that I can offer you no refund, now that the tour is underway. But perhaps I can better adapt my remarks to your tastes. Henceforth let us endeavor to look only at the art itself, considering its properties, not its politics. Surrendering ourselves to it, as we are meant to, yes? Remember to stay hydrated (so long as the guards don’t see you sipping!) and please, won’t you press

6 Matisse/Picasso/Derain/Modigliani

The twentieth century dawns, the volume of art increases—so many greats in one room! (Adjust your player if you become overwhelmed). Truly here is an example of our national motto: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. This brotherhood of artists hangs together in understanding, if not exactly in visual harmony. But Paul Guillaume had his own tricks for making their works more congruous. When he sold these Modernists in his gallery, he put them in antique frames, so they would better match his clients’ décor. He subdued them, in other words, and in doing so made his fortune.

Shall we start with Matisse? In his crowded interiors, no angles are true. He tests what we believe about perspective, he tilts us into *his* spaces, where *everything was false, absurd, splendid, delicious*. See his women hemmed in by stripes and flowers, feel the release a window promises in such a room.

His figures peer back at us, arrested at their leisure, their flat faces both primitive and baleful.

And when we leave them, who do we meet but Picasso? You have heard, I'm sure, of his Blue Period? Will it surprise you to learn that it includes some of these works here, in beige? Ah—I forgot that you, Madame, are a *connaissanceur*: one who understands that blue is not merely a color. You are already ahead of me, aren't you, considering the ambivalence of his embracing nudes. Art imitates life, no? (But I should not presume). Instead let us consider some of Picasso's later pieces: "Large Nude with Drapery;" "Large Bather." Heavy-limbed, heavy-eyed, colossal women with sorrowing souls. You might forget, amid such paintings, that Picasso could be playful.

Nor would you guess it of André Derain, who in his younger days chummed around with Matisse and painted with such outrageous colors that critics called the two of them *les Fauves*, "the wild beasts." You will find none of those Fauvist pieces at l'Orangerie—one of the gaps created when Madame Guillaume began selling off her late husband's collection. Still, as you might guess by the number of his paintings here, André Derain was well-loved by the Guilllaumes. Even as his talent waned, he became Monsieur's top seller and Madame's lover. Look here at how he painted his mistress, in her cool silk dress with her dead eyes: "Portrait of Madame Paul Guillaume with a large hat." I am sure Derain was only following convention, in titling the painting—but in doing so he also reminded the viewer to whom his sitter belonged. Would he have preferred it otherwise? Would she? What does that face say to you, Madame? Derain was a veteran of the Great War and a pawn during the next war. The Nazis loved him for his classicism and he toured Germany as their invited guest; his reputation never recovered. Like Monet, like Cassatt, he suffered a disease of the eye; he died (as did Madame

Guillaume's second husband) when a car struck him. Can you imagine: those two terrible accidents within the same year!

Such misfortunes do not move these stolid Modiglianis, long-necked and angular. There hangs Modigliani's portrait of young Paul Guillaume, "Novo Piloto"—the new helmsman. See the dealer at 23, with his small, suave moustache and a cigarette between his fingers, a commanding figure against a backdrop of red. He had not yet met his future wife, had only just outrun his humble beginnings. He was not then the hunched and wan figure Derain made him, in *his* portrait four years later (just there, do you see?). Of course this entire collection might be considered a portrait of the Guillaumes, a portrait of their marriage and ambition—but I forget myself again: still you have not pressed 2.

6.5 Marie Laurencin, *Les Biches*, 1923

Bring your hands to heart center as we move toward Rousseau; breathe in and remember your intention. My Sunrise Yoga classes meet daily, Madame, just €8 by donation. Breathe out and note your surroundings. Just there on the half-wall, you see several paintings by Marie Laurencin.

Now, the former toll-collector Henri Rousseau was a self-taught—

Pardon?

Yes, I did say *Marie*. Why such surprise? Can it be that you have not heard of her, the mistress of the poet Apollinaire, the muse of Paris's avant-garde—oh, and an artist, too? By all means then, let's pause for a moment, so that you can admire these five pieces.

Laurencin's subject matter was women, naturally. What else? See here: lovely women with white, oval faces and black eyes. Women holding guitars, dogs, cigarettes;

women with each other. They fill the canvases, looking past or away from us, looking out from a place we can't quite decipher: pastel-robed women against auroral backdrops. For Nijinsky's ballet *Les Biches*, *The Does*—the wanton-women, in the slang of the day—Marie Laurencin designed costumes and sets. She painted huge white drapes to fill the back wall of the stage. Their edges appear crudely basted with black thread; they part to show blue sky outside, as inside the dancers show us the anguish of the drawing room. *It's not me*, said Coco Chanel, when Marie Laurencin made her portrait, this portrait hanging right before you. Chanel wouldn't have it, couldn't see herself in that languid, leaning figure attended by eager animals. But Chanel's designs changed that season, her collection becoming pinker, more ethereal. The self-replication of the feminine: parthenogenesis through art.

7 Now, as I was saying, today we might term Rousseau an outsider artist and—

What?

Were there others like Laurencin? Who designed for the stage, you mean? Derain, yes, worked with Diaghilev and—

Oh.

I see.

You mean other post-Impressionist women painters. Well . . . I referenced Mary Cassatt—weren't you listening? Press 1 to return to *Les Nymphéas* and hear a few words about her. True, Cassatt came earlier and none of her works are here, but all the same: I mentioned her! And of course we know there must have been other women, painting in their homes to pass the time or pay the bills . . . as well as contributing in other ways to the development of modern art. Why, just look around you at all the painted women! Here are women by Matisse, Modigliani, Chaïm Soutine. They were making art, too, those models. They

were inspirations, integral to the process! Think of the patience they must have extended to these impossible men—I could not do it. (Could you?) Or consider the art of simply attiring oneself in such an era. The complexity of the undergarments, the toxicity of the cosmetics! A polished woman risked her sight as surely as did these painters, mixing their hues.

No? That's not what you want? No more stories of women who could balance like apples for hours? (What yogis they might have made!) Another name, other works?

Well, this is a small museum, after all, and all of these masterpieces came to the French public as part, it is said, of a grand bribe—the widow Guillaume buying impunity after she tried and failed to have her adopted son murdered. I could tell you more about that scandal, or about how she came by the boy in the first place, a black-market orphan—but how am I to tell you about art that she and her husbands did not value or keep? If Marie Laurencin's presence here only agitates you, only suggests absences . . . maybe you'd be better pleased by another museum? I could give you a very good rate on my guide to the Musée d'Orsay, which . . . well, may not satisfy you either—but perhaps we would get along a little better across town, browsing works from this century and the last, at Le Centre Pompidou? Now, I am not so confident as to offer you a money-back guarantee, but it is said that a full 17% of that collection is art by women . . . and after all, my dear Madame, is it really the artist's gender that matters? Gender is only a social construct, and does art care about matters like sex? Some would say the best art transcends all of this.

Well, no, *I* did not say it. I am afraid I do see a difference in who paints what and how. I cannot quite bring myself to discount gender after a dose of Renoir, a dash of Cézanne, a draught of the designing Madame Guillaume. And of race, so far you have not spoken—but of course, Madame, I am

sure that this lack of diversity must trouble you, too. *Non?*

My dear Madame, how I wish I could offer you a more satisfying tour, still for just €2. A tour of the place your imagination had made. But since I can't give you more women, or not of the sort you desire, permit me at least to give you an Eiffel Tower. Whichever size you like, even this big one!

A plastic phallus? I see why you might say so. But remember please that I have given you a very good tour, much better than you would have otherwise bought—and without your waiting in yet another line. I have given you a little yoga, too, and maybe after you stop in the gift shop, I could lead you through Shavasana, corpse pose. Is it in stillness, Madame, or the gift shop, that we find our truest alignment?

Will you really say no to both offers? Instead perhaps you would like to return to *Les Nymphéas*. I could sit there all day, watching the light change, the throngs wax and wane. If l'Orangerie would only hire someone to enforce the no photography rule, I would be the most eager applicant for the job. Do even the water lilies fail to move or calm you?

You are a hard one, Madame; you are nobody's muse. Where can I send you from here—where will you go? Perhaps your Paris awaits you somewhere, after this terrible sun sets. Perhaps you will find it down a narrow cobbled street, once candles light the cafes. What a selfie that would make, *non?* You have so few days of paid vacation, Madame—don't surrender them to disappointment. You have flown, alone, across the wide Atlantic to spend five days in our city; tonight, I beg you, keep forgetting your carbon footprint and enjoy some *foie gras*—vegan, of course.

As for me, I will be as you found me, roaming the Jardin des Tuileries with my towers and my tours, looking for others to amuse for only €2. So little, for so much: art, yoga, truth.

You would give me a review, Madame? Ah, but I have no *page Web*. I hope you will remember me, all the same. Maybe I will see you, tomorrow morning as the sun rises upon le Sacré-Cœur, with your travel mat in tow and a new intention in mind. Indeed, I hope you will come, not to pay for my services, but to guide *me* to what answers you may find. *Namaste*, Madame, and *bonne chance*.

(SMACK AS OF CHEEK KISSES, JINGLE OF COINS,
FOOTSTEPS CRUNCHING ON SOFT GRAVEL)

Scene: a white sky above the Musée de l'Orangerie. People moving south, toward the Seine. A woman in a sundress and fanny pack is carried away with the crowd. Another figure pauses on the pedestrian bridge, just shy of the Left Bank. Their arm draws back for an overhand toss.

(SOUND OF PLASTIC TOWERS CLATTERING.
SPLASH.)

(FADE OUT TO EDITH PIAF, to “La Marseillaise,” or “Non, je ne regrette rien.” Either one an anthem—and truly, Madame, do you even note the difference?)