Workers’ Daughters on the Outer Boulevard (Illustration for Emile Zola’s “L’Assommoir”), 1877/78

Pen and brown ink, over black chalk, on ivory laid paper;
275 x 399 mm (10⅞ x 15⅞ in.)
REGENSTEIN COLLECTION, 1986.420

A contemporary once remarked of Pierre Auguste Renoir that “he always looks on the bright side.” Certainly, this artist’s extraordinary popularity today can be explained in part by his preference for bright color and appealing subject matter. Given his commitment to visual optimism, Renoir faced no small challenge when in 1877 he set about providing illustrations for one of the most grittily realistic novels of his day, Emile Zola’s L’Assommoir.

Although regarded by many of its contemporary readers as an unforgivable lapse of taste on the part of its author, L’Assommoir aroused a great deal of interest and firmly established Zola’s reputation as a writer of the Naturalist school. As Zola put it, he aimed to depict “morality in action” by telling the story of “the inevitable downfall of a working-class family in the polluted atmosphere of our urban areas.” Written largely in the crude metaphors and slang of slum dwellers themselves, the novel revealed to contemporary Parisians an aspect of current life that most found frightening and repulsive.

L’Assommoir was published in 1877 by Renoir’s patron, the publisher Georges Charpentier; the first illustrated edition was issued the following year. Zola himself was involved in selecting the artists for this project, and approached his old acquaintance Renoir to provide drawings for four scenes in the novel. Renoir’s preference for creating images of beauty made the illustration of the particularly seedy passages of the novel problematic, and some of the resulting drawings lack conviction. However, a lively scene toward the end of the tale provided a more inspiring, if still bittersweet, subject for his fourth and highly successful drawing, Workers’ Daughters on the Outer Boulevard, now in the Regenstein Collection.

In this passage of the novel, the reader meets for the first time the precocious beauty Nana, daughter of the laundress Gervaise, who is the book’s protagonist. Nana, a voluptuous and high-spirited teenager, would eventually become the subject of Zola’s novel Nana (1880), in which she evolves into a ruthless courtesan. In Renoir’s light-filled pen-and-ink drawing, however, there is still a sense of Nana’s innocence, as she escapes her tenement for a Sunday-afternoon walk on the outer boulevards with her friends. Zola’s text represents the episode as follows:

Amid the slow, dull crowd between the spindly trees, they rushed along. . . . Their flying dresses trailed behind them their youth and innocence, they displayed themselves for all to see in the glaring light with the coarseness and obscenity of street urchins, provocative and delicious as virgins returning from the bath with their hair still damp.

Renoir’s first attempt at illustrating Zola’s compelling word picture was a loose wash drawing that probably proved too subtle and sketchy for reproduction. The artist’s second attempt, the Chicago sheet is rendered in layered strokes of warm, brown ink. It is one of the most important drawings the artist produced during the years of high Impressionism. Here, Renoir gently subverted the dark undertones of Zola’s text: While the novelist had seen the blossoming of Nana’s physical beauty as the starting point for her eventual loss of innocence, Renoir’s interpretation shows the girl and her friends as brash yet graceful. Full of youth and energy, they revel in the bright sunlight and in their own good looks. The artist used varied networks of fine lines to create a shimmering surface in which details and contours dissolve. While Nana’s future may be clouded, her pleasure in the moment is radiant. M.T.
31. JEAN BAPTISTE CAMILLE COROT, The Abbot Jouveno, Carateau of Caubon, 1875, pp. 72-73

32. GUSTAVE MOREAU, Portrait of Eugène Lachéruè, 1852, pp. 74-75

33. GUSTAVE MOREAU, Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra, 1876, pp. 76-77

34. PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR, Workers' Daughters on the Outer Boulevard, 1877/78, pp. 78-79

35. PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR, On the Terrace of a Hotel in Bordighera: The Painter Jean Martin Reviews His Bill, 1881, pp. 80-81

36. GEORGES PIERRE SEURAT, Study of Trees, 1884, pp. 82-83

37. PAUL GAUGUIN, Recto: Portrait of Charles Laval and Other Sketches, 1887; verso: Figure Studies from Martinique, 1887, pp. 84-85


4. Ibid., pp. 140-41.

5. 1998.693.


7. This suggestion was first put forward by Andrea Honore, former Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Prints and Drawings, The Art Institute of Chicago (curatorial files), who noted striking similarities with photographs taken of Degas in profile in the mid-to-late 1890s. For pertinent examples, see Malcolm Daniel, Edgar Degas, Photographer, exh. cat. (London/New Haven, 1992), nos. 16-19. For other examples of Cross's drawings, see Compain (note 5), pp. 140-41, and Paris (note 5), pp. 105-10, ill. For a discussion of Cross's anarchist lithograph L'Errant, see John Hutton, "'Les Prolos Vagabondent': Neo-Impressionism and the Anarchist Image of the Trimardeur," Art Bulletin 72 (1990), pp. 505-512, fig. 7.

Title: "Trois Hommes en buste", 1895/1900,

Description:

38. HENRI EDMOND CROSS, Three Men, Half-length ("Trois Hommes en buste"), 1895/1900, pp. 86-87.


3. For these portraits, see Compain (note 1), nos. 1-4, ill., and Francois Bailleigaud et al., Henri-Edmond Cross 1866-1910, exh. cat. (Paris, 1998), nos. 1-4, color ill. Cross is in no relation to Eugene Delacroix (see cat. no. 26).


5. I am grateful to James A. Bergquist for bringing this monotype to my attention, and also to its owner, Samuel Jostow, for kindly giving permission to publish it. In its measurements, the monotype corresponds with lot 25 ("An Spectacle") in Paris, Hôtel Drouot, Henri-Edmond Cross: Ancienne Collection Félix Fénéon (Oct. 15, 1986). The Regenstein monotype corresponds with lot 23 ("Trois Hommes en buste") in the same sale.

6. Although there are numerous preparatory studies and sketches by Cross, his draftsmanship has been little studied. See John Rewald, H. E. Cross: Carnet de dessins, 2 vols. (Paris, 1993); and Isabelle Compain, Henri-Edmond Cross et les primitifs italiens; Le Voyage de 1908 (in Hommage à Michel Lachôte: Études sur la peinture du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance [Milan/Paris, 1994], pp. 606-38. For other examples of Cross's drawings, see Compain (note 1), pp. 140-41, and Paris (note 5), pp. 105-10, ill.

39. WALTER RICHARD SICKERT, Recto: The Old Bedford, c. 1894; verso: The Gallery of the Old Bedford, c. 1894, pp. 88-89


40. JOAN MIRO, The Kerosene Lamp, 1924, pp. 90-91


4. Such an alchemical vessel figures prominently in the center panel of Hieronymous Bosch's painting Garden of Earthly Delights (c. 1500; Madrid, Museo del Prado). For more on the concept of alchemy and alchemical vessels, see Lusenda S. Dixon, Alchemic Imagery in Bosch's 'Garden of Earthly Delights' (Ann Arbor, 1980); and Robert J. Berton, The Refreshed Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art (Calgary, 1991).