Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions

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The expansion of the art market and the liberal government policies of the early Third Republic encouraged a remarkable proliferation of “independent” exhibitions in Paris, shows that were mounted separately from the huge State-sponsored jamboree, the annual Salon.1 Dealers, art societies, enterprising painters, and groups like the Impressionists sought out new venues and experimented with installations so as to present their works in the best circumstances. In selecting sites and decor, exhibition organizers did not have recourse to anything like today’s specialized techniques of display; they began to develop only toward the end of the century and then primarily for shop merchandise. Instead, the practices and innovations in this period seem to have been prompted by more intuitive judgments about the social connotations of a variety of spaces and audiences and about the appropriate place and role of art in relation to these. By considering a range of shows and focusing on the Impressionists, this essay examines how installations and venues corresponded to or affected understandings of contemporary painting in late nineteenth-century Paris.

In contrast to the diversity of the sites that I have just remarked, Rosalind Krauss has argued that nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse increasingly developed around a generalized exhibition space, characterized by the exclusivity of a wall reserved for showing art and nothing else. Modernist works internalized this medium of display and exchange, Krauss suggests, as landscapes flattened, expanded laterally, and came thus to resemble the exhibition wall itself.2 My paper investigates this generalized “exhibitionality,” but tracks its elaborations across culturally differentiated spheres. Rather than stress how the proliferation and variation of exhibition walls essentially served to provide an increasingly uniform medium of exchange, I emphasize the social and aesthetic distinctions that contemporaries experienced as significant and held to be definitive.3

Among the social expectations that affected the presentation and reception of art in nineteenth-century France, the delimitation of the boundaries between the public and the private was especially crucial, although deeply problematic. This distinction depended in the art world on the separation between the Salon and the independently sponsored shows, or, more precisely, on the perception that the latter drew audiences that were not only much smaller but more artistically cultivated. (Hence the separation was both real and ideological.) As art was shown and viewed in diverse places—the Salon, the gallery, the club, the bookstore, the studio, the apartment, the home—the distinction between public and private served to create finely gradated nuances of refinement, and the ideal private exhibition came to be represented as a haven for aesthetic appreciation that was removed from the crass commerce of the art market, the divisive polemics of criticism, and the sensationalized tastes of the “public.” Regardless of the fact that the purpose of shows was to sell works or to introduce artists to patrons, creating a non-commercial ambiance was important, and this seems often to have required that the decor and installations of exhibitions be clearly distinguishable from the large rooms stacked with paintings in the Salon or the halls glutted with commodities in Universal Expositions and other late nineteenth-century spectacles. In addition to size and scale, the character of the actual place of exhibition and the composition of the audience suggested what would be an appropriate installation in the private show and, accordingly, what modes of viewing would be encouraged. But there was no certainty in these matters, for during this period venues and their social connotations changed quickly. While the “dealer and critic system” expanded rapidly, artists also increasingly took the initiative for their own promotion, and Salon organizers began to adopt practices from the private domain. The distinction between public and private proved

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3 Another important account showing that structures of exclusion and exclusivity were essential to the production and exhibition of 19th-century modernism is Y.-A. Bois, “Exposition: Esthétique de la distraction, espace de démonstration,” Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne, no. 29, fall 1989, 57–79. Bois compares Courbet’s motivations for withdrawing his art from the Universal Exposition of 1855 in Paris and mounting a separate exhibition, where his paintings could be shown together, with Marx’s nearly contemporaneous insights into the fetishistic nature of the commodity at the International Exhibition of 1851 in London, where industrial products were enshrined apart from their production or use. The artist’s desire to preserve the special status of art and not let it be transformed by capitalism into a fetish or commodity was, according to Bois, what constituted the appeal of the museum as a site for modernist art.
to be chronically unstable and required constant renegotiation with the actual conditions of artistic production and consumption. 

Exhibition decor and installation provided organizers with an interface between their conceptions of the special qualities of the art on view and their projections of the expectations of audiences and collectors. Most important, artists or dealers had to determine how a single work should best be contextualized, that is, how it should be positioned in relation to other works and the environment. Installations often had to balance the increasing importance of the individual artist and the integrity of his or her production, on the one hand, against the explanatory or polemical potential afforded by installation according to school, genre, or style, on the other. Similarly, organizers had to define implicitly the status of the small easel painting, which was the type of work most frequently exhibited: was it to be evaluated as an autonomous object addressing the public or as a potentially decorative complement to a domestic space? 

Despite the articulation of such problems of definition, many of the key decisions in arranging shows—the selection of site, the choice of wall color, the ordering of picture frames, the hanging of works—were often treated by organizers as simply practical matters and left to the last minute, not to be dictated by elaborate artistic principles or subjected to close critical scrutiny. That such decisions remained relatively untheorized in the day-to-day practice of presenting works—so that changes were not seen to be the result of newly articulated “definitions of art” so much as they seemed to be responses to different material circumstances—makes the history of these exhibition presentations particularly valuable as a register of the variety of assumptions that conditioned production and consumption during this period.

My purpose in this study is to explore the vicissitudes of late nineteenth-century installations in relation to understandings of contemporary art, and to describe the appearances of some of the shows. In the absence of many visual records or sustained discussions, my project has mainly entailed piecing together off-hand remarks in critical commentaries and artists’ letters. I make no effort to survey all of the types of shows of the early Third Republic or even to treat a representative sample, a project beyond the scope of a single article and one whose unfeasibility as a research endeavor points up the pressing need for a synthetic study of dealers and art institutions of this period. Instead, I concentrate on the presentations at the Impressionist exhibitions and the early shows of the Société des Indépendants, already well documented as events, but not systematically considered as installations.

I have adopted a roughly chronological approach, but not because there is a story of development to tell. Rather, by moving between descriptions of Impressionist practices and analyses of other exhibitions—the Salon of the Second Empire, artistic circles and societies, dealers’ shows and publications—I want the juxtapositions to demonstrate that for contemporaries, sustaining the separation of public and private spheres in the face of the unprecedented expansion of the art market proved to be not only difficult but crucial.

**Criticism of the Salon and Practices of the Early Impressionist Shows, 1874–77**

If the history of Impressionist installations has a beginning, it is not with actual practices but with published complaints. In a letter of 1870 that appeared in the newspaper *Paris Journal*, Edgar Degas described what was wrong with the Salon and advised how to fix it. His complaints warrant review here, for they concern many of the problems that other commentators thought marred the State-sponsored forum for presenting new works to the public.

Rather than crowd works up, down, and across the walls (Fig. 1), the Salon should install only two rows, Degas recommended. Paintings should be separated by at least twenty to thirty centimeters and positioned according to their own demands instead of those preordained by traditional patterns of symmetry. Because not all paintings were made to be viewed from the same vantage point, Degas continued, the artist should specify upon submitting a piece for consideration where it should be displayed, on either the higher or lower level. Furthermore, rather than divide works by medium, the Salon should mix drawings and paintings and should include large and small screens to provide additional space, like those the British had employed in their Fine Arts section at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867. 

Degas aimed his modest reforms at adapting the public forum of the Salon to the needs of exhibitors, and he assumed that the primary concept determining installation should be the integrity of the individual artist and the individual work. Just as authorship should override distinctions in medium, so the autonomy of the work—the particular requirements of a single piece (here as assessed by the artist)—should override the desires of the installer for decorative ensembles. The Salon should not interfere with the right of each individual to determine his or her own best place on the wall.

Degas’s privileging of the individual actually conformed to the logic of recent Salon reforms, which had essentially reordered the relative importance of the competing concepts of how a work should be presented in an exhibition for the public. Starting in 1861, Salon installations had in most cases abandoned allegiance to the central academic concept of the hierarchy of genres (history painting had heretofore

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1 I have used “public” and “private” in the way that these appeared in contemporary art criticism to describe exhibitions. For an analysis of art production in terms similar to these, but emphasizing the gendered character of the spaces, see A. Higonnet, “Secluded Vision: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” *Radical History Review*, no. 38, 1987, 16–36.


often assumed pride of place in the public show for its didactic and inspirational possibilities. Except for several rooms given over to official and patriotic paintings, the alphabet and the artist’s name determined where oils hung. The sense that different media required different viewing conditions prevailed, however, so that while most paintings were displayed in heavily trafficked areas of the Palais de l’Industrie, works on paper appeared in the more dimly lit and secluded galleries, which were aptly called “the desert.” Even though the Salon continued to weigh alternative conceptions of how a single work should properly be viewed and understood, the propriety of the individual author had, by the time of Degas’s complaints, triumphed over two potentially competing notions: the desire for public instruction and the aesthetics of decorative integration.6

In addition to the rights or needs of the individual artist, other points in Degas’s letter had also been rehearsed many times in the preceding decade (if not before), including admiration for the spacious installations of the English, who had abolished “skying” at the Royal Academy in the 1860s and who were generally held in France to be commercially and aesthetically more advanced in the arrangement of dealers’ galleries and other exhibition spaces. Typical of the attitude of much of the French art press was the anonymous commentary of 1867 in La Vie parisienne that praised the English display at the Universal Exposition and noted with approval and envy the finer points of the presentation: the generous spacing of watercolors on neutrally tinted screens, the gentleness of the indirect lighting and the presence of neutrally colored carpets. By contrast, the color of the walls in the French exhibition reddened everything and the ambient dust all but obscured the works, which were struck from above by harsh, raking light and from below by reflections scattering off whitely waxed floors. The French were better painters than the English, the commentator concluded, but their art shows were too crowded and they looked like industrial fairs.

This final complaint, the most commonly made accusation of all against the Salon, corresponded to fears that the State-sponsored exhibition was principally a marketplace rather than a forum of public enlightenment, fears that each nineteenth-century generation seems to have rekindled anew. As Patricia Mainardi has shown, the distinction between art exhibition and industrial fair was considerably lessened after 1855 by the location of the Salon in the vast spaces of the Palais de l’Industrie, whose calendar of events was booked with marketable goods. Depending on the month, the visitor might encounter cows, plants, or paintings (compare Figs. 2 and 3).7 La Vie parisienne demanded special treatment for art, and its commentator concluded his report in 1867, as was typical, by recommending that exhibitors take over the shows and find suitably dignified places and appropriate conditions for displaying works of art.8

By 1874, for Degas and the other artists who mounted the

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7 On the changes that accompanied the moving of the Salon from the Louvre to the Palais de l’Industrie, as well as an extremely useful history of Salon practices, see P. Mainardi, “The Eviction of the Salon from the Louvre,” Gazette des beaux-arts, sér. 6, cxii, July–Aug. 1988, 31–40. For artists’ organization of their own installations during the Second Empire, see idem, Art and Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867, New Haven, 1987, esp. 49–61.

Impressionist exhibitions, finding appropriate conditions meant withdrawing from the principal public forum, with its continual debates over the commercial or didactic connotations of exhibitions, and exploring the possibilities of more intimate and in that sense more private areas. Their shows were situated in the midst of Haussmann’s newly constructed city blocks: in 1874, they mounted an exhibition in the photographer Nadar’s recently vacated studios, and in 1876, in the art dealer Durand-Ruel’s gallery; in 1877, they rented and adapted a domestic apartment for the show. In such spaces, the artists had the opportunity to cultivate conditions appropriate to the appreciation of small easel paintings. Still, the concept of the integrity of the individual’s production continued to govern most practical decisions regarding the installations of these ventures: the individual oeuvre became a standard feature of the exhibition wall, almost regardless of domain in the late nineteenth century. However, some reviewers, responsive to the connotations of the sites as well as the appearance of the art, thought that the shows suggested a new and different understanding of the relation between viewer, painting, and exhibition space.

Aspects of the exhibition in 1874 must have been reassuringly familiar to Paris collectors, audiences, and critics. The brownish-red linen, favored by Nadar, was left on the walls as a ground against which the paintings were hung. It marked a departure from the red of the official walls of the Salon and...
Universal Expositions but its apparent neutrality must have
made it similar to the subdued tones that critics had praised
in art society exhibitions of the early 1860s such as those
mounted in elaborate dwellings by Louis Martinet and
Alphonse Jame, exhibitions where discretion was the sign of
distinction in decor: not too bright the red, not too shiny the
gold, not too ostentatious the setting (Fig. 4).9 In 1874 the
artists had draperies hung in Nadar’s studio, prompting the
critic Philippe Burty to remark favorably on its similarity to
the appearance of a private gallery.10 To take advantage at
night of their proximity to the theater district, they adopted
late hours for the show, a schedule employed for exhibitions
in England and also regularly used for shows mounted by
French art circles and societies of the 1860s (with a short
memory, some French critics hailed these hours as an
innovation).

How works were arranged at the exhibition in 1874
remains somewhat unclear, even though such matters were
of sufficient concern that they were mentioned in critical
reviews and the catalogue itself carried as a sort of epithet a
single line of installation policy: “Once arranged by size,
draw determined their placement.”11 The display was spa-
cious, with works hung in two horizontal rows and with larger
works placed on the upper level. Jules Castagnary said that
the works were arranged by artist and hung in alphabetical
order, with the beginning letter of the arrangement estab-
lished by draw.12 Different media were exhibited but no
mention was made of their location, a fact that suggests that
the entire show was probably rigorously governed by the
progression of artists’ names. Little effort seems to have been
made to fashion decorative ensembles.

In contrast to the fair treatment of the individual on the
exhibition wall, we get a different sense of the effect of the
installation from the comments of the reviewer who was most
sensitive to the intimacy of the setting and its implications for
the understanding of the paintings: Degas’s friend, Philippe
Burty, who was a well-known figure on the Paris and London
art scenes, an ardent Republican, Japonist, and Anglophile,
and a major print collector and critic. In a review that Burty
composed for the English audience of The Academy, he
offered an analogy for the exhibition space of the first
Impressionist exhibition:

The chief object of these gentlemen, whose views, temper-
ament, and education are very dissimilar, was to present
their paintings almost under the same conditions as in a
studio, that is, in a good light, isolated from one another,
in smaller numbers than in official exhibitions, which are
like docks of painting and sculpture, without the neigh-
bourhood of other works either too bright or too dull.13

For the French audience of La République française, Burty
evoked another comparison: the paintings were “lit rather as

9 On Alphonse Jame, see Gazette des beaux-arts, ix, 1861, 189–192. On
Martinet, see “Inauguration de la nouvelle galerie de la Société
10 P. Burty, “Exposition de la Société anonyme des artistes,” La Répub-
lique française, 25 Apr. 1874; repr. in Centenaire, 261–262.
11 “Une fois les ouvrages rangés par grandeur, le sort décidera de leur
placement.” For reprints of the Impressionist exhibition catalogues and
essays on the shows, see New Painting.
12 J. Castagnary, “L’Exposition du boulevard des Capucines,” Le Siècle,
29 Apr. 1874; repr. in Centenaire, 264–265. In contrast, Burty said the
privilege of the picture rail (cimaise) on each panel had been decided by
lot; Centenaire, 261.
The Academy, 30 May 1874, 616–617.
in an average apartment, isolated, not too numerous." The favorable connotations of personalized space that informed Burty's descriptions of the proper lighting and viewing conditions pointed toward values that he confirmed by praising the painters for coming in person to the show to greet visitors and to meet amateurs. These were values that clearly complemented or advanced his assessment of the nature of the painting of the nascent Impressionist group, which must be understood in relation to the artists' withdrawal from the spaces and trappings of "officialdom":

They renounce success, medals, decorations, and even the esteem of their fellows to pursue a purely artistic end. They depend upon elements of interest strictly aesthetic, and not social or human—lightness of colouring, boldness of masses, blunt naturalness of impression. . . . [B]ased on the swiftest possible rendering of physical sensation, it their art] considerably narrows the domain of painting. It scarcely leaves room for any but decorative motives; it forbids itself the stirring representation of those complex situations in which the mind collects its forces and takes possession by analysis of places, situations, sentiments.

Indirectly, Burty found in the general aspects of much of the painting on display—in its distance from history painting and from the intellectual and analytical complexity of adequately representing the external world—a link with what he termed the decorative, which he in turn associated with the privately sponsored exhibition. Such a loose but suggestive counterplay between definitions of public and private, autonomous and decorative, intellectual and sensual, was indicative to Burty of the nature of the aesthetic experience in the intimate interior and would continue to be seen, in his reviews, as part of Impressionist shows.

The installations of the next two Impressionist exhibitions did not substantially deviate from that of the first. In 1876, the show was mounted in Durand-Ruel's gallery on the rue Le Peletier and contained 248 works, a number approaching the upper limit for most independently sponsored shows in Paris of the 1870s, although critics still praised exhibitions of this size for being manageable in a visit of an hour or so! With more works by each artist (Monet was typical in advancing from nine entries in 1874 to eighteen in 1876), the installation practice seems once again to have deemed the individual the most significant category, although the alphabetical rigor and fair play of the first show gave way in the second to modification by other concerns. Medium played a role, with the first room containing primarily works on paper (an inversion of the Salon practice of putting oils in introductory public spaces), and, as Hollis Clayson has observed, it is possible that the most objectionable works, pieces by Degas and Pissarro, were intentionally located in the last of the three rooms.

The show of 1877 was the first to be mounted by the group in a bourgeois apartment, the type of site that would later provide the spaces for the most decorative of the Impressionist installations, that is, those in which works were most thoroughly integrated with and subordinated to the environment. In 1877, the five rooms of the centrally located apartment on the rue Le Peletier were subdivided by panels, a common practice, which created both more intimate areas and more hanging surfaces. Once again, to judge from reviews, the individual functioned as the primary motif of the installation, although the desire to distribute the largest works ceremonially among rooms and to create harmonious and thematic juxtapositions also affected the arrangement.

Over and against the individual artist or the autonomous work, however, Burty insisted in his reviews on the decorative aspects of both shows, perceiving a relation between the character of the paintings on view and the manner in which they were presented: "The dominant interest of this group being the effects of light and open air, irisation and color, this painting will benefit from being enframed in the vast panels of a high gallery," he wrote in one article of 1877. For his English public, Burty offered similar observations in a later review: "The rooms are very spacious and well lighted, both important requisites for the kind of paintings now exhibited there, which is characterized by a kind of decorative freedom and demands blank spaces between the respective frames." Burty was once again concerned in 1877 with certain implications of seeing works in relation to their setting, finding the paintings effective only when considered as décors rather than as completely independent or autonomous works of art (tableaux): "They offend as paintings because of their sketchy appearance and indications of scumbling. Seen in place and as décors, they have a brightness and frankness which are undeniable." Viewed in relation to the surroundings and from a certain distance, the paintings were effective in creating a sense of light; the otherwise incomplete works possessed expansive qualities of "decorative freedom," which demanded a spacious and well-lit setting. Here lack of autonomy or self-sufficiency and apparent intellectual complexity became a virtue, allowing the successful integration into the interior of a work that appeared decorative without becoming (mere) decoration.

Notions of the decorative and of completeness were frequently employed critical concepts in the discussion of Impressionist painting in the 1870s. In deploying these, however, Burty was the reviewer who was most attentive to the installations of the early Impressionist exhibitions and

14 "Éclairées à peu près comme dans un appartement moyen, isolées, pas trop nombreuses"; Centenaire, 261.
15 Burty (as in n. 13), 616.
18 "La donnée qui domine dans ce groupe étant la recherche de la lumière et des effets du plein air, de l’irisation, de la couleur, cette peinture gagne à être encadrée dans les vastes panneaux d’une haute galerie"; P. Burty, "Exposition des impressionnistes," La République française, 1 Apr. 1876.
19 P. Burty, "The Exhibition of the 'Intransigeants,'" The Academy, 15 Apr. 1876, 365.
20 "Elles heurtent comme tableaux, par leur aspect d’ébauches, par leurs indications de frottis. Elles ont, en place et comme décors, une valeur de clarté, de franchise d’effet qui ne sont pas niabiles"; P. Burty, "Exposition des impressionnistes," La République française, 25 Apr. 1877.
the most concerned with the implications that the privacy of the setting might have for the perception and, in that respect, the status of the paintings being exhibited. Still, his connections remained vaguely formulated: metaphorical conjunctions of visual appearances and social spaces. More fully developed conceptions of the place of art in the private domain, as well as the characteristics of art to be valued in the intimate show, were to be found elsewhere, in responses to exhibitions other than the Impressionist ventures. When compared to these exhibitions where a more or less coherent logic of the private show emerged in installations and publications, it becomes evident that the walls at the early Impressionist shows failed to secure convincingly the values associated with either the public or private space but constructed instead a rather awkward site.

Installations in Art Circles and Societies in the 1870s and 1880s

Simultaneously with the Impressionist exhibitions in the mid-1870s, other privately sponsored shows were mounted by artistic circles and societies, groups that generally included both artists and amateurs as members. Although their shows were not exactly comparable to those of the Impressionists, being more exclusive socially and more fully accredited artistically, they provide an illuminating point of comparison for measuring the implications of installation practices and independent exhibition spaces. Art circles and societies had been organized during earlier periods and they thrived in the 1870s and 1880s when they afforded increasingly professionalized artists direct access to collectors and to financial backing for shows, while allowing amateurs to buy without the intermediary of a dealer and on occasion to exhibit their own works. As Tamar Garb has recently emphasized, these often entirely male institutions and their elaborate houses served as a non-commercial forum for leisure and business contacts outside the home, establishing a site that extended well beyond the demands of the art world to service more generally the needs of mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois society for forms of sociability reliant on gendered and financial exclusivity. Here the cultivation of aesthetic appreciation relied, in part, upon the assurance that one was removed from the competition of the market and shared a space with amateurs and artists of compatible sensibility. Even here, however, the most important concept guiding exhibition arrangement remained the individual, although the types of works selected for display, as will be seen, often corresponded to the supposedly shared desires of participants to relate to one another through art—an aesthetic appropriate to the site.

Creating the right ambiance was essential to the success of the enterprise of the circles. The standards were set by the first and most famous of the “petits salons,” the Cercle de l’Union Artistique, familiarly known as the Mirlitons, which began in the 1850s and counted among its members in the 1870s such artists as Carolus-Duran, Edouard Détaille, and Ernest Meissonier. The Mirlitons held exhibitions in the 1870s in the elaborate top-floor galleries of the building owned by the circle in the place Vendôme (Fig. 5). Such extensive facilities were generally associated with the elite circles, although some dealers, such as Denman Tripp, whose galleries opened in a hôtel in 1885 (Fig. 6), sought to encourage shared activities by providing special rooms for viewing prints, reading about art, and talking and socializing.

Contemporary illustrations and critical reviews reveal that in installing shows in their main room, which also served for concerts and theater performances, the Mirlitons generally avoided vast spaces reminiscent of the Louvre or Salon and favored more intimate settings constructed in part by eases and screens. Following the common practice at the Salon and in dealers’ galleries, the room at the place Vendôme was further subdivided by divans and plants, which also served to diversify a coloration otherwise dominated by the dull red of tapestried walls and the muted gold of frames. Daytime illumination came through an iron and glass skylight and for evening sessions (which sometimes ran as late as 11 pm), the room was hung with gaslight chandeliers, carefully distanced from the walls and ceilings to avoid shadowing and equipped with cup-shaped reflectors to direct light laterally. Works were mounted on the walls in several rows, with the larger and higher works being rather steeply inclined forward, both to accommodate the visitor’s position below and to avoid direct reflection of the daylight coming from above. Although in the event of a sizeable exhibition, installations might depart from the norm of two or three rows to fill the wall, rarely, if ever, were paintings displayed in a single row, an arrangement that some critics recommended for adoption in the 1870s but that must have seemed to exhibition organizers altogether impractical given the general expectation that shows should contain at least one to two hundred works. Similarly revelatory of the mode of viewing in the

Diego Martelli, on the display of works for the Laurent-Richard sale of 1878: “The 110 masterpieces were very well arranged in a vast locale, severely hung in red, installed on the same line and at an equal distance from one another. Thus one could look at each one of these paintings separately, putting oneself at a convenient viewpoint, and it was possible to contemplate them as the unfolding of a magnificent panorama, not as the dance of a thousand forms and colors bumping into each other, as in the room at the Champ-de-Mars.” (“Les cent douze chefs-d’oeuvres étaient très bien disposés dans un vaste local, tout sévèrement tendu de rouge, installés sur la même ligne, et à une juste distance l’un de l’autre. Ainsi l’on pouvait regarder chacune de ces toiles séparément, en se mettant même à un point de vue convenable, et il était de la sorte loisible de les contempler comme le déroulement sous les yeux d’un magnifique panorama, non comme la danse de mille formes et de mille couleurs qui se heurtent entre elles, comme dans les salles du Champ-de-Mars.”) Martelli went on to recommend such installations for public exhibitions: “La Vente Laurent-Richard,” in Martelli, Les Impressionsnistes et l’art moderne, Paris, 1979, 78–85.


24 As an indication of how unusual the practice of single-row installation must have been, consider the comments of Degas’s and Pissarro’s friend, and
intimate yet sociable spaces of the Mirlitons is the fact that although skirts beneath dados went out of fashion for exhibitions in the 1870s, these rooms retained the waist-high railing that allowed the viewer to balance his or her weight while closely inspecting a work to appreciate the detail of the depiction or the execution of the surface. Totally oblivious to one’s surroundings, carefully poised against the railing, with nose pressed against the painting and with catalogue dangling in hand: this is the stock viewing posture that incessantly appears in representations of all sorts of mid-century exhibitions, public and private. Yet conditions conducive to such engagement seem to have been most often realized in exclusive spaces like those of the Mirlitons.

Circles provided amateurs a valued haven from the hustle and bustle of the Salon and a place to appreciate art properly, without rubbing shoulders with the crowd or being confronted by unsympathetic or harsh critical judgments. For the Mirlitons was the sort of aristocratic milieu where, unlike the Salon or a dealer’s gallery or an Impressionist show, men were likely to remove their top hats and lower their voices. Ernest Chesneau, Inspector of Fine Arts during the Second Empire, a well-informed critic and enthusiastic
supporter of independent shows (including the Impressionist endeavors), felt ill at ease performing his public role at the Mirlitons, where the privacy of the locale made the directness of art journalism inappropriate:

To tell the truth, the Mirlitons' show presents only one inconvenience, but it is serious. One is in the midst of interested parties, invited by them to their dwelling: one is their guest. As a result, it is appropriate to express one's opinion of the exhibited works only with discretion, to speak only at half voice, sometimes to be altogether silent. Only admiration can be shown expansively.25

The exclusivity of the site did not preclude publicity (the shows were reviewed) but the milieu did apparently quiet criticism sur place. Criticism was understood here as a "public" discourse about art that had been painted for the "public" and, as such, it was out of place at the circles. This was the representation that ill-at-ease reviewers provided as they wrote about the shows without the justification of serving the public interest, a justification readily provided by the Salon, and without the need to fulfill such higher functions of criticism as assessing the state of art in France, encouraging unknown talent, educating the tastes of viewers, or even presuming to speak for a readership. The art critic and historian Henry Houssaye put it well: at the circles, the reviewer had nothing to diagnose in the present and nothing to predict for the future.26

These proclamations did not prevent critics from writing about the shows or from employing, when assessing the merits of each individual, the same formats and types of evaluations that they used when discussing artists at the Salon. (They did their job, regardless of decorum.) When reviewers noted that their judgments had been inappropriate at the show but then expressed their opinions in newspapers, they exploited a perhaps contradictory set of expectations among their readers. On the one hand, protests against the privacy of the circles bolstered the image of the critic's allegiance and responsibility to a public readership, and reinforced the notion that criticism informed and represented the views of readers, perhaps even transforming them into audiences for art. On the other hand, the reviewer's description of private milieus advanced the chief characteristic of the shows that appealed to amateurs and no doubt to the social imaginations of many newspaper readers as well: namely, that the private space was the preserve of a truly experienced aesthetic, a relation between art and viewer that was in its very essence noncritical, perhaps even nonverbal.

Critics' descriptions of the privacy of these shows, and their simultaneous circumvention or transgression of that privacy, reveals that exhibition walls like those at the Mirlitons could be simultaneously situated in different places—an elite Paris address and the columns of the press—and subjected to conflicting expectations of art with relative ease. The Mirlitons had been valorized in opposition to commercial vulgarization at the Salon, but the principal publicity mechanisms of the market functioned just the same, except for reviewers' apologies. Here the separateness of the private domain and its removal from the market were reinforced in principle even as they were denied in practice.

By the end of the 1870s, such "private" settings as the Mirlitons had come to be praised by favorable reviewers for providing a haven where artists could disclose their most "natural" or spontaneous aspects, the personal sides of their individuality, their incomplete works. This intimacy seems to have developed over the course of the decade. The shows, which were generally mounted before the opening of the Salon in May (hence the name "petits Salons"), were reviewed in the early 1870s as if their primary purpose was to provide a select preview or an elite rehearsal for the main event on the artistic calendar, even though their contents would scarcely support the comparison, for they invariably contained a large percentage of portraits (often by members) and decorations.27 By the end of the decade, when groups such as the newly formed Société d'Aquarellistes Français announced that works submitted by member artists to its shows would not reappear at the Salon, the independence of the exhibitions helped to reshape expectations about the nature of the art that would be shown there. The "petits Salons" began to be seen by some favorable commentators as the forum where artists could disclose their individuality through the presentation of the personal side of their work. The critic, historian, and supporter of the Rococo revival in the decorative arts, Victor Champier, relied on these associations in 1879 in assessing the reasons for the success of the shows of the Mirlitons and its friendly rival, the Cercle St.-Arnaud:

Amateurs, who reject the weariness of the Salon . . . , prefer these intimate exhibitions which seem improvised. . . . Artists freely send here the piece that they have at hand: a well-turned sketch, a curious daub, an indication of landscape, as well as a painting pushed to perfection. A landscapist can show himself with a portrait; a portraitist can exhibit a marine. It's delightful and all this happens unceremoniously. One adores these lovable caprices, this free humor by which an artist shows himself as he is. . . .28


27 A good description of the types of works shown at the Société des Arts-Unis in the 1860s is to be found in Gazette de beaux-arts, vi, 1860, 257–263. A characteristic review anticipating the Salon is Chesneau, 1873 (as in n. 25).

28 "Les amateurs, que rebutent un peu les fatigues du Salon . . . préfèrent ces exhibitions intimes qui paraissent improvisées. . . . Les artistes y envoient librement le morceau qu'ils ont sous la main; une esquisse bien venue, une pochade curieuse, une indication de paysage, aussi bien qu'un tableau poussé à la perfection. Un paysagiste s'y montre parfois avec un portrait; un portraitiste y expose un essai de marine. C'est à rire, et tout se passe sans façon. On aime ces aimables boutades, ces traits de libre humour par lesquels un artiste se fait voir tel qu'il est . . . ;" V. Champier, Chronique de l'année: L'Année artistique, Paris, 1880, 175–174. On Champier, see Silverman, esp. 214–219.
To unofficial affairs, then, the artist sent work that escaped professional definitions of genre, medium, or finish but that the amateur, as the acquaintance of the artist, would understand and treasure for what it revealed of the private side of the individual. For those who developed the logic of the private exhibition to its fullest, the expressions of individuality among members of the circles and societies did not result in the discord that characterized the Salon, whose competitive and democratic forum forced heightened displays of self-promotion. Because members had to be voted into circles, a similarity or compatibility of sentiments—a certain level of taste—was assured. Thus, explained the reviewer of La Paix, the viewer of these shows could pass from one work to the next and appreciate the nuances of the person, without experiencing too much of a jolt in moving between neighbors on the wall.29

These expectations soon turned routine in favorable critical reviews. Emile Cardon, veteran art critic of more than twenty years and author of L’Art au foyer domestique: La Décoration de l’appartement in 1884, introduced the 1889 season of “petits salons” to readers of the Moniteur des arts with praise for aristocratic discretion, noncommercial character, and individual sensibility, traits mutually reinforced through participation in these shows as artist or amateur:

Artists send to these shows choice works that have often not been made for the market or to please from the viewpoint of the buyer, as is too often done for the annual Salon. These works are not executed for the crowd but for an elegant, discreet and delicate milieu, which understands the soft-spoken and is taken aback at the great outbursts required to make the crowd hear.

Sometimes in these little Salons, one finds pieces that the artist has kept precisely in the corner of the studio. For him, for intimates, the piece responds to a state of soul or spirit, to a truly felt impression, something very moving, lived, still better . . . something that improves my sense of the best of what this artist can do.

Such pages can only be appreciated in a little Salon; they would be lost in the great hawking fair of the Palais de l’Industrie.30

Even when art societies held shows in dealers’ galleries, as was frequently the case by the late 1880s, they retained for Cardon the air of an uncommercial affair because they offered works not made to compete noisily for the attention of the crowd at the Salon but to speak softly in the refined sensory register of an elite or personal space. The effect of artists’ submissions was compared to that of the corners of ateliers, places where one might discover the genesis of ideas.31 In contrast, art on exhibition in the public milieu brought forth a collision of mixed metaphors, but ones that may have been ultimately compatible for the amateur who read Cardon: machine-like professionalism, Barnum-like egosim, mob-like hysteria.

The formation of societies based on media, especially following the example of the successful Société d’Aquarellistes Français in 1879, underscored the nonpublic character of the exhibitions.32 To the intimacy of the space was joined the intimacy of the technique and materials. Like pastels or prints, watercolor was treated in specialized journals as an art of the connoisseur, an art removed from the glaring public pronouncements produced in oil for Salon consumption.

The space reserved for watercolors and pastels at the Palais de l’Industrie in the 1870s and 1880s was celebrated by Raoul dos Santos, then critic of the Moniteur des arts, as a place where only artists and true lovers of art ventured, a place whose intimacy could be measured by the absence of history or anecdotal painting.33 Cardon similarly maintained that “private” light was necessary for the proper appreciation of works on paper. “It’s a delicate, intimate, lovable art that one can only appreciate well in a choice, elegant, distinguished milieu; it needs some care and installation; it needs a discreet light; the light of the street or the public place does not suit it at all.”34 It was to these associations that the Société d’Aquarellistes appealed in the reticently decorated exhibition premises that it maintained on the rue Le Peletier, in the same building, in fact, as the galleries of Durand-Ruel (Fig. 7).

Organization of exhibition by medium might seem to sacrifice the all-important principle of the individual artist’s production, but at the shows of the Aquarellistes, each of the artists (nineteen in 1879) had his or her own panel where twenty or so works could be arranged, although most of the exhibitors made modest and spacious arrangements with under ten submissions. Presumably the same practice was employed here as would later be instituted for the Internationale Expositions at the gallery of Georges Petit: artists

29 “Cercle de l’union artistique” (as in n. 22).
30 “Les artistes y envoient des oeuvres de choix, qui, bien souvent, n’ont point été faites pour le marché, au point de vue de l’acheteur, comme cela se pratique trop souvent pour le Salon annuel; les oeuvres ne sont point exécutées pour la foule qu’il faut raccrocher, mais pour un milieu élegant, discret, délicat, qui comprend à demi-mot et qu’effrayent et choisissent les grands éclats de voix qu’il faut pousser pour se faire entendre de la foule.

Quelquefois dans ces petits Salons, on trouve de ces morceaux qu’un artiste garde précieusement dans un coin d’atelier, pour lui, pour les intimes, un morceau répondant à un état d’âme ou d’esprit, à une impression ressentie, quelque chose d’émou, de vécu, encore meilleur—plus bon, dirais-je, ce qui rend mieux ma pensée que ce que l’artiste a fait de mieux.

Ces pages-là on ne les goûte que dans un petit Salon; elles seraient perdus dans le grand déballage forain du Palais de l’industrie”; E. Cardon “Causerie,” Moniteur des arts, 1 Feb. 1889.

31 For example, at the Peintres-Graveurs show held at the Durand-Ruel gallery, artists were encouraged to create the experience of an atelier visit by including various states of prints on their panels; see Pointe-sèche, “Peintres-Graveurs,” Journal des arts, 25 Jan. 1889.
32 The founding of numerous societies based on technique, medium, genre, or aesthetic allegiance in the 1880s and 1890s and the change that this orientation marks from the basis for association in the 1860s has been noted by Bouillon, “Sociétés d’artistes” (as in n. 22), 96–97.
34 “C’est un art délicat, intime, aimable, qu’on ne peut bien apprécier que dans un milieu de choix, élegant, distingué; il demande quelque soin et un peu de mise-en-scène; il lui faut une lumière discrète; le grand jour de la rue ou de la place publique ne lui convient pas”; E. Cardon, “Aquarellistes chez Petit,” Moniteur des arts, 18 Jan. 1889.
could place works on their own panels as they saw fit. Installation became the decision, and thus the expression, of the individual.35

A principle similar to that governing their installations also informed the publications of the Société d’Aquarellistes. In the lavish exhibition catalogues for their shows, each artist illustrated a spread of two pages with drawings, some of them mere doodles, and included the titles of exhibited works, often in handwritten script. Just as each artist had his or her own panel at the show and his or her own set of pages in the catalogue, so too, in the most deluxe of the Aquarellistes’ ventures—a two-volume limited edition of “critical” studies published in 1888—each artist appeared in his or her own chapter. Different critics wrote individual chapters, resulting in a sequence of personal appreciations.36 The effect produced by the pairing of writers and authors was quite different from that of a volume of (public) criticism, where even if all were praised, the names of artists might nonetheless appear to compete for the accolades of a single author. In the publications of the Société d’Aquarellistes, the logic of the aesthetics of the private show was preserved: each chapter encapsulated the sensitive appreciation of one individual for another, an intimate understanding.

What is revealed when the shows of these circles and societies are juxtaposed with the Impressionist exhibitions is that the values that came to shape the contents and organization of the former—the nonprofessional and nonfinished, the informal and personal, the aristocratic and cultivated, the private and the nondiscursive—were also values called upon in the evaluation of Impressionist painting. The Impressionist exhibitions failed to engender among many reviewers expectations similar to those shaped by the circles (i.e., that here was a proper haven for the artist’s expression of self and for the viewer’s cultivation of aesthetic sensibility, hors Salon). An explanation may be found in the art displayed at the Impressionist shows, to be sure, but the failure must also have resulted from the nomadic appearances of the group and their insecure definition in relation to the spaces and practices that structured the private domain, especially when they temporarily renovated apartments for shows open to the public. Moving from place to place, the Impressionists clearly lacked the financial solidity, established premises, and informed amateur membership of other associations. In 1880, Victor Champier identified the group as “this society that doesn’t have a place of its own.”37 Rather than appearing to escape the public domain and to provide a refuge for refining the senses, their exhibitions seemed to some commentators to be designed for posturing in public: their stylistic experimentation was polemical and factional; their expression of individuality, forced; their lack of finish, an affront. In accord with the hybrid character of the exhibitions, responses varied widely, and favorable critics like Burty found aspects of the shows especially satisfying as a private domain where the senses delighted in decorative ensembles. No critic removed his top hat at the Impressionist shows, however, and none deemed the business of criticism inappropriate. Chez les Mirlitons, intimacy meant one thing; at an Impressionist show, quite another.

35 On this aspect of installation, see E. Cardon, “Exposition internationale,” Moniteur des arts, 6 June 1887.
36 Société d’aquarellistes français: Ouvrage d’art publié avec le concours artistique de tous les sociétaires; texte par les principaux critiques d’art, Paris, 1883.
37 “Cette société, qui n’a point de local à elle”; V. Champier, Chronique de l’année: L’Année artistique, Paris, 1880, 140.
Decorative Impressionist Installations, 1879 to 1881

It was from 1879 to 1881 that the Impressionist exhibitions, all held in apartment-like spaces, assumed an especially intimate character. Innovations at this time seem to have been directed toward exploiting associations with the private domain. In particular, this involved renegotiating through practice the definition and interrelation of media, decoration, and individuality. Degas seems to have provided the motivation necessary for these endeavors; with his absence from the show in 1882, innovation ceased.

The most overt manifestation of the new tendencies at the Impressionist shows came with the use of colored frames and walls. Already at the exhibition of 1877 Pissarro and Degas had used white frames, thus marking the first appearance among the Impressionists of what would, after a decade of pervasive use by the group, be called the "Impressionist frame." From 1879 to 1881, Pissarro, Degas, and Cassatt paid considerable attention to the possibilities of employing color to redefine the relationship of work and environment, to enhance decorative appeal, and to code through color relations the individual character of their work. Degas and Cassatt used colored frames for some of their pieces at the show of 1879, but unfortunately no reviewer mentioned how the colors may have been cued to the paintings or surroundings. In his review of the Impressionist exhibition of 1880, J.-K. Huysmans noted that Pissarro's prints were exhibited with yellow mats and bordered by purple frames. These experiments gave rise at the show in 1881 to a profusion of individually designed frames. Although critics of that exhibition spoke of other artists' borders in passing, they were most intrigued by Pissarro's, each of which was apparently tinted with the color complementary to the dominant hue of the painting it surrounded. Huysmans was again the most enthusiastic as well as the most descriptive reviewer:

What variety in the frames, which carry varied tones of gold and which are bordered with margins painted with the color complementary to the frames! The series of Pissarro is, this year, surprising above all. It's a variety of water- and veronese-green, of corn and peach skin, of ungent yellow and wine-colored purple, and you have to see with what tact the colorist has sorted out all his tints to make his skies recede and his foregrounds come forth. It's the sharpest refinement; and, even though the frame can't add anything to the talent of a work, it's still a necessary complement, an addition that brings out value. It's the same thing as the beauty of a woman which requires certain surroundings.39

Not surprisingly, the discovery that the theory of complementary contrasts had informed Pissarro's choice of tinted frames led to the further discovery that the gold frame had been rejected because, it was thought, gold interfered with or even destroyed perception of certain tones within the painting. The border of complementary color made evident one new role that the frame was assuming. It was now to be seen not just as a complement to a painting, or as a zone of transition between the worlds of the painting and the viewer. While serving as a repoussoir, it was also to be perceived as entering into an expansive, active, and coloristic relation with the painted surface.40

Like colored frames, tinted exhibition rooms served the end of subordinating the autonomy of the work to a decorative display and to an identity compatible with or fostered by the surroundings. Burty deplored the crowded conditions at the 1880 exhibition but nevertheless praised the artists for making the best of their limited circumstances by painting the various rooms in those tones that they felt were best suited to the effect (effet) of their works. Just to prove that they were not prejudiced, Burty said, the artists had set one room aside (labeled the Salon d'Institut) and in homage to official practice had painted it antique red. The landscapes of Charles Tillot and Henri Rouart, whom Burty called "les

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39 "Puis quelle variété dans les encadrements qui revêtent tous les tons variés de l'or, toutes les nuances connues, qui se bordent de lisérés peints avec la couleur complémentaire des cadres! La série des Pissarro est, cette année, surtout, surprenante. C'est un barillage de vénérosité et de vert d'eau, de mais et de chair de pêche, d'amadou et de lie de vin, et il faut voir avec quel tact le coloriste a assorti toutes ses teintes pour mieux faire s'écouler ses ciels et salir ses premiers plans. C'est le raffinement le plus acéré; et, encore que le cadre ne puisse rien ajouter au talent d'une œuvre, il en est cependant un complément nécessaire, un adjutant qui le fait valoir. C'est la même chose qu'une beauté de femme qui exige certains atours..."; J.-K. Huysmans, "L'Exposition des indépendants," L'Art moderne / Certains, repr., Paris, 1975, 251. On Pissarro's frames at these exhibitions and on the principle of complementary contrasts, see also Lecomte (as in n. 38).

40 The decorative border reversed the rationale of the traditional gilt frame. The academician, critic, and widely read author Charles Blanc had carefully defined in his work on decorative arts why shiny or mat gold was preferred for framing: shiny or mat surfaces "both adapt themselves to the framing of paintings where light, concentrated towards the center, is stifled at the margins. Gilt has the additional advantage of casting warm reflections onto the painting and lighting it a little, if of course the frame is located well in front of the canvas and creates a concavity favorable to casting these reflections." (The shiny or mat surfaces "s'adaptent l'un et l'autre à l'encadrement des tableaux où la lumière, concentrée vers le milieu, est étouffée sur les bords. La dorure a ici de plus l'avantage de jeter des reflets chauds sur le fond de la peinture et de l'éclaircir un peu, à la condition, toutefois, que le cadre sera bien en avant de la toile, et présentera une concavité favorable au renvoi de ces reflets"); C. Blanc, Grammar de l'art décoratif, Paris, 1882, 190. Because light values in Impressionist paintings were generally not concentrated at the center but tended to be more evenly distributed across the surface, and because in composition the painters often preferred contrasts of color to those of value, Blanc's rationale for the use of gold was no longer pertinent.
sages,” were hung there. It is very likely that this was the exhibition that Pissarro and his son Lucien recalled in 1883 in an exchange of letters about exhibition decoration and specifically about Whistler’s installations. Lucien wrote from London that Whistler, whose show with yellow interiors and butterfly signatures he had just seen, had stolen the Impressionist idea for tinted exhibition rooms. Pissarro lamented in his response that the Impressionists had generally lacked the means to realize fully their ideas for decoration, although he had once had a lilac room with a yellow border, albeit sans papillons.

Whistler had created his first one-man show in 1874 by reconstructing and recoloring a dealer’s gallery to suggest how his works would appear on the walls of patrons’ homes. This and his later installations provided an important precedent for the Impressionist experimentation with domestic spaces and colored rooms and frames, although they were not a source Pissarro later remembered or was at any rate willing to acknowledge. Still, the similarities are striking: the interest in innovative borders, the decorative coordination of painting and environment through complementary contrasts or color pairs, the integration of various media, and (possibly) the mounting of deliberately asymmetrical displays. However, Pissarro indicated his distrust of totally harmonized ensembles in 1883, when he responded to Lucien’s descriptions of Whistler’s exhibition rooms with an attack on aestheticism. Even though the decorative installation might seem to provide a refuge from the anonymity and commodification of art in the public exhibition space, its complete realization—its complete absorption of the work in the fully unified effect of an aestheticized ensemble—seems to have struck Pissarro as a promotional gimmick, for in his letter he associated aestheticism with pufifisme. To seek to deny in this way the “exhibitionality” of the wall was perhaps only to cover its commercialism with a layer of sham.

Although much less insistently or successfully than Whistler, the Impressionists who had tinted rooms of their own at these shows still contextualized art in ways that resonated with models for the domestic domain. To enhance the appearance of their works, the artists exploited in part the feminine pursuit of expressing personal identity through interior arrangement. At the 1881 show, for example, settees and rocking chairs were put in the crowded mezzanine apartment, and Degas’s works inhabited the most secluded area of the show, located at the end of the suite of the five-room apartment, in the cabinet, which he distinguished as his own by hanging it in yellow. The practice anticipates the advice to be offered in manuals on how to decorate intimate spaces, the private rooms where one is face to face with oneself. Here one should avoid ostentation in ornamentation and banish overly gilt surfaces, and instead, Henry Havard advised the female readers of his work on interior decoration, L’Art dans la maison of 1882, “Choose the color that is yours, morally and physically, and then, to put with it, give preference to tones and nuances that harmonize.” Just as a domestic space personalized through color harmony should provide an area “naturally” coded for the complexion of the owner and her more intimate possessions, so the works of a single artist at an exhibition might best be comprehended in the expressive cast of an appropriately tinted room.

The gendered aspects of the model remained mute in most criticism, however, and it was only when Huysmans and Jules Laforgue evoked the common analogy of decorative frames and women’s toilets that the implications of establishing personal taste through color preference were extended. Writing in 1883, Laforgue marveled at the Impressionist borders and relied upon this analogy to reinforce his description of the highly personalized nature of their decorative enterprise:

A sunny green landscape, a bright winter scene, an interior twinkling with polishes and fashions require different frames, which only their respective authors know how to devise, just as a woman knows better than anyone else the nuances of materials and powders and boudoir hangings that will bring out her color, the expression of her face, her manners. We’ve seen frames that were flat, white, pale pink, green, jonquil yellow, and others variegated to the extreme with a thousand tones and in a thousand manners.

As less than autonomous objects in an exhibition display that evoked the space of domestic decoration, paintings required the intuitive (and apparently feminine) gift for “natural” color enhancement.

Similarly accentuating the intimacy of the installations during these years was the artists’ inclusion of different media and their alteration of the surface appearances of oil paintings. In his review of the show in 1879, Havard wrote that he felt certain that both Degas’s and Cassatt’s colored borders were somehow connected with their interest in gouache, chalk, and distemper. Pissarro also shared their concern to explore the possibilities of media such as gouache and pastel, whose dry, opaque surfaces were inherently mat. In fact, critics seem to have felt an irresistible impulse to

compare the effect of Impressionist paintings in general, but particularly the works of Pissarro, Degas, and Cassatt during these years, to pastels or frescoes. The mat surface was an appearance that this group associated with a sense of brightness in the phrase reoccurring in letters by Pissarro and others as a desideratum, “faire mat et clair,” which involved making a surface seem luminous in its own right, without the reflection of external light. Given the setting of the decorative exhibition and the scale of the works, such techniques must also have suggested a rococo-like confection and a delicacy of effect far removed from the glaring “public” surfaces of Salon oils.

The widespread recognition that the Impressionists had manipulated oils to resemble pastel and gouache was probably facilitated by the type of frame the artists employed. As far as we know from contemporary descriptions, the most common Impressionist frame was a hybrid mat-frame that was relatively flat, roughly parallel to the wall, and facing the spectator more than sloping inward toward the painting; usually it was rather plain with only a few bands of different woods, colors, or gilt, and little projecting ornamentation (see, for example, the frame in Fig. 8). It was a border that nineteenth-century manuals recommended for use with already matted works (gouaches, distempers, drawings, etc.) where the frame did not have to encourage the illusion of depth or to establish an appropriately oblique transition between the world of the image and that of the viewer.47

Also contributing to the intimate mode of viewing suggested by the evocation of domestic space was the use of glass for the display of oil paintings. Pissarro was singled out among the exhibitors in 1881 and 1882 for placing sheets of glass over oils, an unusual practice in France (it would be forbidden at the Salon in 1888) but more common in England and quickly associated by reviewers with the mode anglaise.48 On separate occasions, the critic Félix Fénéon and Pissarro remarked on the advantage in placing glass over a work, an advantage that reveals the more subtle processes of perception and association at work: essentially glass served as a filter to alter one’s sense of the physical nature of the surface which, when viewed “naked,” both artist and critic considered to be too rough and irregular.49 Apparently glass acted to elide material irregularities in the painting, thus enhancing perception of the luminous, expansive qualities of a mat surface while simultaneously inviting the precious inspection of a delicate pastel. The toilettet suited well the character of the exhibition, both decorative and intimate.

These shows went further than any other ventures of the Impressionist group in subordinating the autonomy of the work and the individuality of the artist to the harmonies of a private environment. Still, as comparison with several literary enterprises of the period makes plain, the Impressionist experiments were tentative and certain latent tensions within them suggest a considerable reluctance on the part of the artists to define their paintings entirely in the terms of the decorative and nondiscursive modes of the domestic interior. Here, as when they are compared to the exhibitions of circles


48 Huysmans remarked upon the use of glass by the Impressionists as a group at the exhibition of 1882, but for one reason or another, critics consistently noted only Pissarro’s paintings in this respect, perhaps because more of his paintings were displayed under glass. Pissarro either continued this practice or returned to it in the mid-1880s when he probably helped to inspire the Neo-Impressionists as well to exhibit their paintings under glass, which they began in 1886. By 1889, if not before, however, the practice seems to have been abandoned, as may be judged from the critic Félix Fénéon’s comment that year that Seurat’s marines needed glass to complete their toilettet at the Independents’ exhibition; “Tableaux,” La Vogue, Sept. 1889; repr. in Félix Fénéon: Oeuvres plus que complètes, ed. J.U. Halperin, Geneva, 1970, t. 165.

49 F. Fénéon, “L’Impressionnisme aux Tuileries,” L’Art moderne, 19 Sept. 1886; repr. in Fénéon: Oeuvres (as in n. 48), t. 55–56. Letter from Pissarro to Esther Isaacson of 1889, no. 561 in Correspondance de Camille Pissarro, ed. J. Bailly-Herzberg, ii, Paris, 1986, 318–319. Degas also commented on this advantage, while Burty remarked in his review of the exhibition of 1882 that Pissarro’s oils looked like velvety pastels precisely because they were seen under glass (Lettres de Degas, ed. M. Guérin, Paris, 1945, 60; P. Burty, “Les Aquarellistes, les indépendants et le cercle des arts libéraux,” La République française, 8 Mar. 1882). There were, of course, other obvious advantages to placing a sheet of glass over an oil: it protected the painted surface from dirt without incurring the disadvantages of a layer of varnish which might discolor with age. Also, because varnish adhered directly to the surface’s unevenly painted terrain, it might result in irregular and distracting reflections of light. This was the principal explanation Huysmans offered when he saw paintings displayed under glass in 1882. Glass also allowed the painting’s surface to be left mat and thus made it seem less like an oil.
and societies, the Impressionist shows appear to be awkward or strange assemblages.

It was in literature that the most striking and notorious development of the gendered and classed implications of male decorative enterprises occurred. In Edmond de Goncourt's La Maison d'un artiste (1881) and Huysmans's A Rebours (1884), these were given a decidedly decadent and aristocratic allure. Here, primary divisions of responsibility for the appearances of the bourgeois interior—the roles of the man as collector and the woman as decorator—were collapsed as men of leisure inhabited womanless spaces. The retreat to the interior was, Edmond de Goncourt explained, a response to the problem that "life threatens to become public."

Following these well-known literary models, the linking of elite aestheticism and male decoration can also be found in a curious newspaper article of the late 1880s in which Maurice de Fleury described at length the house of an almost certainly imaginary collector, an aristocrat who expressed himself and his modernity through decoration with new materials and recent art. In his "maison sans femme" (emphasis mine) Duke X had positioned Impressionist and Symbolist works in an environment embellished with the architectural materials he advocated for the creation of a style troisième République (the piece was dedicated to Charles Garnier, the most vocal opponent of iron and glass construction). The Duke's quintessentially modernist predilections determined the bizarre appearance of his main salle:

On the ceilings, still more iron, in small beams, rosettes, coffers, casings. On the walls—where it isn't easy to put nails—vast sheets of glass, mounted flat, housing drawings, watercolors, etchings, pastels; while the paintings, framed in crystal with tints logically juxtaposed to the colors of the paintings themselves, all rest on easels.

The house had among its many ensembles a salle de bain lined with pastels of women by Degas, a salle de gymnastique outfitted with energetic posters by Chéret, and a chambre à coucher complete with interiors by Callot and Forain, a Whistler vision, and a Redon nightmare. The "maison d'un moderniste" pastiched for the amusement of the newspaper reader the notoriously decadent behavior of Huysmans's des Esseintes, now rendered less eccentric and more modern, converted to a taste for glass and Impressionism.

These parodic installations far outdid what the Impressionist shows might have suggested about the function or definition of art in a private ensemble. The interiors by Duke X were built on the assumption that the domestic installation of one's collection should completely subsume the works to the quotidian activities and moods of the resident, and vice versa. What is striking about the decorative Impressionist installations of the early 1880s, in comparison, is how much the works exhibited in the tinted settings must have disrupted or, in any case, resisted assimilation into the personalized environment or appreciation through analogy with experiences of the interior. I find it frankly difficult to imagine the effect in 1881 of seeing displayed in Degas's small cabinet, suffused with yellow, his portraits of notorious criminals; or of seeing set against lavender walls, correlated to the tints of frames and placed discreetly under glass, Pissarro's stiffly jointed and roughly brushed peasants. Here, the connotations of the depictions and the decorative-ness assumed by the installation must have resulted in a bizarrely contradictory display.

Whatever motivated the decorative experiments from 1879 to 1881, they seem as much an attempt to contextualize the exhibition wall in accord with its apartment setting as an effort to suggest a mode of perception entirely appropriate for the art. The exhibitors I have discussed drew their installations from gendered and classed practices of decoration, but they stopped far short of enhancing or even endorsing these with the types of works they chose for display. Certainly, it was not the case that they were unsure of how to translate their art into decoration for the interior: in the early 1870s Pissarro had painted above-the-door landscapes of the seasons and in the mid-1880s Monet created door panels of flowers for the grand salon of Durand-Ruel's apartment. Nor was it the case that the decorative installations of the walls at these Impressionist exhibitions compromised the more pictorially specific (and less overtly gendered) conception of the "decorative" that had led Bury and others to praise landscapes in the early Impressionist shows, for such appreciation continued to greet appropriate works from 1879 to 1881. Instead, the odd assortment of forms and subjects that showed up in the colored frames, tinted walls, and close spaces of the Impressionist expositions of these years suggests, I think, that the artists were ultimately unable to accept the possibility that their own installations evinced: art might be subordinated to or subsumed by an emerging (feminine) sense of interior decoration.

Dealers' Exhibitions in the 1880s

Economic conditions in the French art market changed in the early 1880s. The depression that began in 1882 heightened competition for a share of the market in contemporary paintings, a market that seemed to be diminishing and was

50 On La Maison d'un artiste and the Goncourts' model home at Auteuil, see the analysis by Silverman, 17–39.
52 "Aux plafonds, du fer encore, en poutrelles, en rosaces, en caissons, en lambris. Aux murs—où il n'est pas aisé de planter des clous—de vastes sous-verre, plaqués à plat, abritent dessins, aquarelles, eaux-fortes, pastels; tandis que les toiles, encadrées de cristal aux teintes logiquement juxtaposées aux couleurs mêmes du tableau, reposent toutes sur chevalets"; M. de Fleury, "La Maison d'un moderniste," undated clipping from an unidentified newspaper in the Jules Chéret press clipping books, Département des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
Rien décidément les Halles centrales de la l'escalier ont fait leur temps. Rien de plus démodé, de plus commun, que ces immense bazar des Champs-Élysées, où se succèdent les boutiques, les trémolins et les tableaux. Les esquimaux, en se mettant dans leurs moulins les premiers, n'ont donné qu'amusait le premier. Voici un résultat hors ligne de leur essai encourageant.

Figurez-vous, a deux pas du boulevard de la Madeleine, un tympan récent, une galerie luxueuse, annonçant par de grands escaliers et de hauts vestibules, avec boutiques antiques, fleurs, tableaux, etc. Sur les dalles rouges vertes de porphyre, on va admirer de toiles parisiennes complètement de ce monde. A la file les plus parisiennes et le plus artistiques qui passent vite. Avant d'entrer, on se sent presque d'ailleurs, presque de respect pour ce que va voir. Toute une salle voit tout sans reprendre rien qu'une surprise de cendres sur cette vaste galerie tapissée d’iculo rouge, on les cadres intelligents, les couleurs éclatantes harmonieuses et charmées sur ce fond clair et à petits. Savez-vous rien de plus coloré, aux expositions basales du Palais de l’Industrie, que ces attrayantes de fleurs, ces lampes de vitrines vives et ces œuvres de croix qui raviennent tout ce qui à le meilleur s’y être exposé ici. Au contraire, sous la lumiére bien dirigée, par l’opposition de deux chefs et chaud des étoiles de lard, le moindre sonorité prend des proportions d’un tirailleur. Amateurs, préparez votre j.... C’est préd à M. Georges Petit que ce magnifique hôtel a été construit, avec le concours et le talent de M. Jules Bon, l’architecte.
certainly threatened. The Salon, which the State handed over to the artists themselves in 1881, had already begun to experiment with modest innovations in decor, arrangement, and hours. But it was dealers who took the lead at this time and gained more control over artists partly by structuring new possibilities for exhibition while simultaneously affecting expectations about shows with new sites and strategies. Many of the same long-term understandings about what had to be negotiated in displays continued to guide dealers’ practical decisions about installations. Artists were typically assigned panels on which they themselves arranged their works; the importance of the individual now led to the more frequent occurrence of one-person shows. As rival dealers invested in deluxe premises and opened smaller branches in Paris, however, they also experimented with establishing different types of social spaces: more or less private, more or less permanent, and with more or less appeal to the domestic sphere.

The new stage was set by the opening of Georges Petit’s premises on the rue de Sèze in February of 1882, the same month as the collapse of the Catholic bank, the Union Générale. Critics declared the site unprecedented among Paris exhibition spaces for splendor (Figs. 9–10) and only a glance at galleries of an earlier generation is needed (Fig. 11) to establish the difference in milieu. A high vestibule, lined with antique busts on marble bases, old tapestries, and fresh exotic flowers, gave way to a ceremonially broad and gently sloped staircase, stationed with attendants, clad in red. Passing under a thickly draped velvet curtain (red, of course), the visitor turned right into the grand salle, measuring sixteen by twenty-six meters. Here works hung in two or three rows on draped walls of warm chestnut red. Softly filtered daytime illumination came from the iron and glass skylight that extended the entire length of the room. For evening viewing, the regiment of twenty or so regularly spaced chandeliers, equipped with gas bulbs and copper reflectors, added still more warmth to the salle, effects that reviewers found marvellous. Everywhere the decor was plush, some thought a bit to excess. Though impressed overall, the critic for the Gazette des beaux-arts asked only, “Why is everything red, hangings, carpets and furniture?”

Despite what another critic called the “vastitude” of the “Petit(e) salle,” provisions were made for the desire for intimacy in viewing. An elaborate wooden skirting and dado supported works propped upon it for close inspection. The predictable divans and plants were present, although somewhat ineffective as spatial dividers in the salle Petit, and an ample supply of portable chairs was provided to help offset the officialness of the room by permitting spontaneous

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55 The most controversial experiment took place in 1880 when, instead of the usual hanging by alphabetical order, the administration decided to install according to “groupes sympathiques.” Foreigners were placed apart from the rest, and French artists were separated into classes according to honors received. The installation was widely ridiculed in the press. Whereas the usual crowded conditions prevailed for less-honored groups, artists who were “hors concours” had their works hung on the picture rail with the vast amounts of space above left empty. It was thought that the jury itself might have sabotaged the notion of “sympathetic groups” by hanging three depictions of the assassination of Marat in the same room. (See P. Burty, “Le Salon de 1880,” La République française, 1 May 1880.) For innovations in the Salon in the period following the one considered here, see Aquilino.

conversations and facilitating comfortable observation. Petit had it both ways: the grandeur of the space could suggest Garnier's Opera, but the flexibility of the arrangement could accommodate a range of shows and purposes.

In function the salle needed to be flexible. It was available for regularly scheduled use by artistic societies and for rent by others wishing to mount one-time shows; it was also intended to supply the commissaire-priseur Petit with a more distinguished environment for auctions than was available at the nearby Hôtel Drouot. The Société d'Aquarellistes inaugurated the space in February 1882, abandoning for good their two-room suite in the Maison Durand-Ruel on the rue Laffitte. Doubts about the wisdom of this move from intimate space to great hall, from residing in one's own place to competing in a merchant's domain, were expressed by Henry Havard, who was generally concerned as a critic with the implications of exhibition installation and, as we have seen, an expert on interior decoration:

Have they gained much? We would not dare to claim it... what they've acquired in pomp and solemnity, they've lost in intimate and discreet charm. At the rue Laffitte, they were at home, really at home, catalogued under their name, housed under their roof; they had no competition seriously to fear. Now that they've lodged themselves under the sign of a merchant, they have everything to watch out for from a rival enterprise.57

Despite such reservations, aesthetic and commercial, the salle Petit seems to have been a great success in establishing new expectations for exhibition decor. For aristocratically inclined Frenchmen in these depressed (and republican) times, the grand conviction suggested by vast opulence could quickly override the delicate predilection for a private interior. In Gil Blas, the commentator Jeanne-Thilda quipped that the audience who would fail to appreciate the taste at Petit's would be republican, for they tended to see red differently from the rest.58 Expectations about the possibilities of the site were no doubt also boosted in 1883 when the greatest intimist of all, Edmond de Goncourt, chose to exhibit there his collection of eighteenth-century art, the works he had described in situ in the Maison d'un artiste. For less elevated sensibilities and for the foreigners who came to the city to buy, the salle must have been easily negotiable. Although unique in Paris, it was roughly the same size as the main room of the Grosvenor Gallery in London, and it must have seemed less imposing if compared to that most modern and elaborately outfitted place of merchandizing, to which Emile Zola among others noted its resemblance, the Paris department store.59

Hurt by the crash of the stock market, Durand-Ruel responded to the palace of his rival (as well as to Petit's bid sérieusement à craindre. Maintenant qu'ils logent sous une enseigne de marchand, ils ont tout à redouter d'une entreprise rivale”; H. Havard, “L'Exposition des aquarellistes,” Le Siècle, 15 Feb. 1882.


Zola's description of Petit's gallery as “les magasins du Louvre de la peinture” is quoted in Camille Pissarro: Lettres à son fils Lucien, ed. J. Rewald, Paris, 1950, 102, n. 1. It appears in Zola's manuscript for his 1886 novel about the art world, L'Oeuvre (NAF 10316, p. 354; Département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris). The appropriation of innovations in the display of other sorts of merchandise for the presentation of painting must be also considered; it

57 “Y ont-ils beaucoup gagné? Nous n'oserions le prétendre... ce qu'ils acquièrent en pompe et en solennité, ils le perdent en charme intime et discret. Enfin, rue Laffitte, ils étaient chez eux, bien chez eux, catalogués sous leur nom, abrités sous leur toit; aucune concurrence n'était
for Impressionist business) not in kind but with a new tack, one that exploited the already tested virtues of the intimate space, the individual artist, and the wealthy amateur. In the spring of 1883 Durand-Ruel transformed a mezzanine apartment at 9 boulevard de la Madeleine into a gallery and mounted there a series of one-person exhibitions, beginning with Boudin and followed by Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, and Sisley. Each show included various media and works on loan from notable collectors, but apparently as a result of Durand-Ruel's experiences in arranging the new space, the size of the exhibitions shrank from over 150 works by Boudin in February to around seventy or so by Pissarro in May. We know little about the appearances of the gallery-apartment on the boulevard de la Madeleine except that it was small and very lavish: four rooms, hung in garance-colored cloth, furnished with tables and twelve red-clad chairs.60 “Fort bien ornée, ma foi!” was one critic's not atypical reaction.61 Another noted the thick carpets and wall hangings and set the social register accordingly: “One goes there discreetly and speaks softly.”62 Some critics understood the gallery to be a permanent home for the Impressionists, perhaps a resolution to questions of stability raised by the roving appearances of the group shows and the need to have a place of their own.63 A survey of the gallery’s records reveals that 9 boulevard de la Madeleine was, in fact, an address reserved exclusively for Impressionism: except for Boudin, there was apparently nothing else in the place. Sisley described the moment to Durand-Ruel as one when the Impressionists had ceased to be nomads.64

was a field in which the United States was already thought to be advanced and influential. For example, in Zola’s L’Oeuvre, the dealer Naudet used the new “American trick” of installation, hanging a single painting in “sacred isolation” to make it seem special and more expensive. Zola’s manuscript notes reveal that this was based on the practices of the dealer Sedelmeyer, who had constructed a very chic gallery in a hôtel and often “operated” on one painting at a time, as for instance in 1881 when he displayed a work by the Polish artist Munkacsy, Le Christ de Jérusalem, with phenomenal success. For other American merchandising tactics, including the invention of the word “display,” see W. Leach, “Strategists of Display and the Production of Desire,” in the very useful collection, Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880–1920, ed. S.J. Bronner, New York, 1989, 99–132.

60 These details are drawn from the “brouillards” and “grand livre” in the Durand-Ruel gallery: I would like to express my gratitude to the gallery for allowing me to consult these materials. The recorded expenditures show that the gallery at 9 boulevard de la Madeleine was an expensive undertaking: during the period from July 1882 to Dec. 1883, Durand-Ruel spent at least 11,615 francs on decoration (including some minor remodeling) and 18,000 on rent.


63 For example, the critic Hustin remarked that the rooms had been “affecté spécialement depuis quelques temps à l’exhibition des impressionnistes”; Exposition d’Eugène Boudin, “Monteur des arts,” 9 Feb. 1883. See also the similar remarks by P. Berty, “Les Paisages de Eugène Boudin,” La République française, 4 Feb. 1883.

64 Sisley made the remark in the context of arguing in favor of a group exhibition, rather than individual exhibitions, for the new site: “Ce n’est pas il me semble au moment où nous cessions d’être des nomades, que nous avons un local définitif, bien placé, que nous devons songer à inaugurer un autre genre d’expositions”; Letter of 5 Nov. 1882, in Les Archives de l’Impressionisme, ed. L. Venturi, Paris, 1939, ii, 56.

The boulevard de la Madeleine was apparently a good move made at the wrong time; despite the enormous expenditure on its decoration, no shows were mounted after those of the inaugural spring season and the gallery closed its doors at the end of the year. Following this venture, Durand-Ruel remained content to compete with Petit in Paris from his premises on the rue Laffitte. And even though he could on occasion mount shows in specially designed decors, such as that created in 1893 for the Bing-sponsored show of Japanese art, with exotic pink and green hangings and spare, asymmetrical designs on the walls (Fig. 12), Durand-Ruel seems to have decided that it was best not to be too adventurous in Paris but to subscribe to the norm: red tapestried surfaces, gilt frames, a spacious arrangement with some easels and a few palms. Installed in one or more of his gallery rooms, an Impressionist show could still appeal here to an audience’s imagination of the preferred milieu for experiencing modern art. In 1891 the critic Emile Bergerat condemned the Salon and its commercialism and recommended instead that his readers go to see Monet’s series...
paintings at Durand-Ruel’s: a “truly private and intimate space.”

Durand-Ruel extended the decorative tendencies of Impressionist paintings not so much through the practices he instituted in his gallery as in the publication he devoted to the experience of Impressionist painting in his home. He produced his own version of the “maison d’un moderniste” in a deluxe edition of 1892, _L’Art impressionniste d’après la collection privée de M. Durand-Ruel_. Skillfully composed by Pissarro’s close friend, the gifted young _littérateur_ and critic, Georges Lecomte, the book describes the possessions of the dealer in a multitude of mini-chapters, curiously bracketed between an introductory account of the development of Impressionism and a concluding note on the future of the movement. Thus framed by a narrative of the historical importance of Impressionism, the titles and contents of the middle chapters shift dizzyingly from the names and attitudes of individual artists to the titles of individual works to the appearances of the rooms of the _maison_ Durand-Ruel. The apotheosis of decoration and description occurs in the chapter on the _petit salon_ of the dealer’s home:

We enter into the drawing room of M. Durand-Ruel. The lowered blinds create delicate shadows and already on the walls appear reflections, glimmers, mysterious glares. The lightness of cool tones illuminates. We could say that these radiant colors are being seen in the confusion of a dream, such is the joy of this dawn attenuated by subtle fog. . . . All the joys of nature are condensed in this small space.

Lecomte proceeded to evoke paintings by Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro in a dense and reflexive prose which suggested the decorative possibilities of the art, stretching actions from sentences across paragraphs and hues from two-dimensional surfaces across three. His celebration of the Durand-Ruel _petit salon_ ended with a note on the thick draperies, tapestries, and carpets that enclosed the room and protected its silent drama from the harshness of the tumultuous exterior. Here the private domestic space became a pantheistic microcosm, encompassing nature and artist, painting and resident, indeed submerging these merely material qualities in the dream of a higher unity.

Such a vision of wholeness, domestically sheltered, answered to deeply felt needs to preserve the integrity of the private domain and to secure there the truth and the purity of aesthetic experience. The thick curtains in Durand-Ruel’s house seem metaphorically to shut out a host of evils—competitive markets, divisive politics, unsuitable publics, critical polemics, and perhaps even words themselves—in order to secure at “home” (Lecomte’s term) a space where unity can be recovered through the senses. Even a narration of the history of Impressionism would only be, to judge from the ordering of Lecomte’s chapters, an intrusion on the sensual immediacy of the _petit salon._

In the end, the _maison_ Durand-Ruel dealt shrewdly with competition from the _salle Petit._

### Impressionist and Independent Shows of the Late 1880s

In the late 1880s, some avant-garde circles reacted against the implications of decorative installations and the values of intimacy that had so contributed to the appeal of privately sponsored exhibitions. While the efforts of the Neo-Impressionists were informed by a more hermetic and insistent aestheticism than the decorative and more commercially practical impulses that characterized Impressionist

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65 E. Bergerat, “Chronique parisen,” _Gil blas_, 17 May 1891; as quoted by Aquilino, 82. It is worth nothing that Durand-Ruel later complained that his main gallery on the rue Lafitte, although subdivided into several rooms, was too large for good business: “One sees too many things at once, one hesitates, one listens to the opinions of other visitors and puts off purchases until later. In addition, in large rooms all objects look smaller and as a result the prices that one asks for paintings seem more elevated than if one showed the works in a small locale” (“On voit trop de choses à la fois, on hésite, on écoute les avis des visiteurs et on remet les achats à plus tard. En outre, dans les grandes salles tous les objets paraissent plus petits et par suite les prix que l’on demande des tableaux semblent plus élevés que si on les montre dans un petit local”); “Mémoires de Paul Durand-Ruel,” in _Archives de l’impressionnisme_ (as in n. 64), ii, 174–175. For an early description of the rue Lafitte gallery, see J. Raffey, “Galerie de M. Durand-Ruel,” _Revue internationale de l’art et de la curiosité_, vii, 15 Dec. 1869.


67 It is important to observe the difference between Lecomte’s domestica
tion of Impressionism and the attitude of the traditional collector, who would most likely prize the art in _his_ home for its historical value or its contribution to his collection. An interesting suggestion of how an ideal of the collector and his home could have been translated into installation practices in this period is suggested by the remarks on Paris museum reform by Charles Saunier, a critic and historian whose enthusiasm at this time included vanguard art, like the Neo-Impressionists, Japanese artifacts and the patrimony of the French Gothic. Saunier recommended that paintings in museums should be grouped with objects and furniture of the same period and placed in small rooms, fashioned like domiciles, so that the visitor would sense that a man of taste and discrimination had collected them there: “Make the visitor forget that he is in a museum, give him the illusion that he is at his home, that the objects belong to him and are part of his life, that his fantasy has recently placed them like this; teach him to love beauty, to understand it, give him time for reflection” (“Pour que le visiteur ne s’aperçoive pas de se trouver dans un musée, lui donner l’illusion qu’il est chez lui, que les objets lui appartiennent, font partie de sa vie, que sa fantaisie les place naguère ainsi; lui apprendre à aimer le beau, à le comprendre, lui laisser le temps de la réflexion”); “La Parure des oeuvres d’art,” _Ermitage_, x, 1895, 257–260. Although Lecomte and Saunier each ultimately appeal to the home as the site of the authentic experience of art or the exercise of taste, the viewer-resident in Saunier’s account is clearly meant to emulate the self-consciousness and historical sensibility of the collector and not, as in Lecomte’s text, to exclude history so that self and painting can mingle in a “natural” (achronologi
cal) interior. For a discussion of the relationship of history and interior decoration, to which my remarks here are indebted, see Silverman.

68 For the relationship between the Neo-Impressionists and dealers, see M. Ward, “The Rhetoric of Independence and Innovation,” _New Paint
ing_, 421–428. Complaints about the growing number of private exhibi
installations, because the younger group mainly participated in public shows, their reassessment of the autonomy of easel painting possessed the power of critique. Now, walls were to be clearly defined for the exhibition upon them.

A preliminary manifestation of these tendencies occurred at the last Impressionist exhibition, which was held in the late spring of 1886 in a splendidly situated, five-room apartment. Each of the seventeen participants had his or her own panel on which to mount an unlimited number of works in any manner. However, as a result of what started as personal quarrels and became polemical divides, the Neo-Impressionist faction installed its work as a group in the last room of the show. This exhibition lacked the amenities of some of the earlier Impressionist ventures: no hangings, draperies, plants, or Algerian settees. "So much the better," said the militantly avant-garde Belgian critic, Octave Maus: "All attention is directed toward the works."69 That insistent focus on the works themselves, along with an allegiance to group presentation, subsequently emerged as the guiding principles of Neo-Impressionist installations.

Many of the Neo-Impressionists adopted as their primary forum not a privately sponsored venue but a decidedly public one: the Société des Artistes Indépendants, which had been founded in 1884 and which held its exhibitions from 1887 onward in the Pavillon de la Ville de Paris, supported with city funds. Ranging in size at this time from roughly four hundred to seven hundred works, the shows were jammed into four large rooms and entries might be mounted in three or four horizontal rows. Participants could submit as many works as desired and could specify which should be placed higher or lower, relative to the others in their own submission. The individual was the primary installation concept, but rather than follow alphabetical order on the wall, organizers sought to situate each artist within a compatible group. Thus, at the show opening in August 1886 and at each exhibition thereafter, the Neo-Impressionists and other avant-garde artists appeared together in the final room. The arrangement encouraged critical polemics.

It was principally in this forum over the course of the late 1880s that the Neo-Impressionists developed an installation aesthetic, one that addressed the public nature of their exhibition site. The autonomy of the work came foremost: the separation of the painting from its environment and its exclusive claim on the viewer’s attention were essential to secure. Having endorsed the white frames that the group favored in 1886 and 1887, the politically and artistically radical critic who was the principal defender of the Neo-Impressionists, Félix Fénéon, introduced the concern for autonomy when he claimed that the artists’ experiments in 1888 with frames of complementary color were misconceived: had the frame been painted to put the painting en valeur, he asked, or vice versa?70 This same year in the radical paper, Le Cri du peuple, Paul Signac defended the Neo-Impressionists’ rejection of the red of the walls at the Independents and their decision to hang the walls of their space, the last room, with gray coverings. When works were

70 F. Fénéon, “Le Néo-impressionnisme,” L’Art moderne, 15 Apr. 1888; repr. in Fénéon: Œuvres (as in n. 48), i, 84.
displayed here with white or other achromatic frames, he claimed, the effect was to make the colors of the paintings more vibrant. In another piece published in the same newspaper in 1888, Signac mounted a diatribe against the viewing conditions created by the deep-red walls and frames “dripping with gold” at the galerie Durand-Ruel and the salle Petit: it would be up to the Neo-Impressionists to establish the definitively normal (neutral) exhibition environment. It was in this year that Pissarro expressed his preference for gray frames, and the following year that Seurat, too, showed his paintings with gray borders at the Independents’ exhibition. In subsequent framing experiments Seurat and others established marked contrasts between frame and painting (Fig. 13)—contrasts of material, tone, and shape—which reinforced a key principle of the Neo-Impressionists’ attitude toward exhibition installation at this time by moving further away from any implied decorative connection of painting, frame, and wall to concentrate instead on the emphatic presentation of the painting as a self-sufficient work in an ideally neutral (and I should add, public) space.

With definitive pronouncements, the Neo-Impressionist group and its critics posed as experts who determined norms for public display, norms sometimes justified as simultaneously aesthetic and social. In a review of 1890, for example, Signac complained about the conditions at the shows mounted by the Belgian group, Les XX. Held in a former museum, the exhibitions were plausily installed, noted Signac, beginning with the ushers and the vestiary and continuing through to the marble bases for sculpture, the door draperies of red velvet, the green wall hangings, and the palms. His conclusion about the effects combined condemnation of the injurious effects of such splendor with some (deliberately) hyperbolic aestheticism:

[These objects are] certainly decorative but because of their complementaries [i.e., the color reactions they produce] they are destructive of the harmonies of the paintings, which are the victims of this luxury. The normal exhibition of paintings will be that where, to the exclusion of all colored objects (catalogue, wall hanging, flowers, frames, even women’s hats), only the colors of the painting will sing the triumph of their undisturbed harmonies.

In the late 1880s the white frame was similarly defended by critics: white guaranteed the autonomy of the work but did not designate the object, as did gold, an article de luxe. Henry van de Velde explained that Seurat’s framing experiments had been motivated in part by the desire to “repudiate the luxurious riff-raff of pompous gold borders.”

These seem now to be minor adjustments to prevailing conventions: small shifts of definition and acts of resistance. The painters’ nearly exclusive reliance on color relations and balances to justify their practice (the playful absurdity of Signac’s recommendation of a totally monochrome environment) all but reduced to a minute optical calculus the issue of how socially defined (and correspondingly colored) spaces might determine an exhibition aesthetic. Still, insofar as the Neo-Impressionist practices and pronouncements stood counter to dominant Impressionist tendencies of the day—to the tendency to interiorize painting as private decor in the maison Durand-Ruel or to float objets across the aristocratic red of the salle Georges Petit—their concerns to establish a normative and public mode held open at least the possibility that vanguard painting might occupy different social places and address broader audiences.

realized at the Neo-Impressionist gallery on the rue Laffitte, which opened in 1893. A reviewer of a show there in 1895 provided a rare description of the site and praised the spacing of the works for not speeding the eye through the show: “As soon as one enters the Neo-Impressionist sanctuary, one is struck by its impeccable attire: dark blue cloth applied to the wall has happily replaced the sumptuous red fabric, commonly used in galleries or official exhibitions. On this blue cloth, bright frames and few of them—just what’s needed so that each work is not blocked by those around it: frames placed in a single row, at picture-rail height” (“Dès qu’on pénètre dans le sanctuaire néo-impressionniste, l’on est frappé tout d’abord par sa teinte impercée: de l’étoffe bleue foncé appliquée au mur, une heureusement remplacé le ‘somptueux Andrinopole’ usité d’ordinaire dans les galeries ou expositions officielles. Sur cette étoffe bleue, des cadres clairs, peu nombreux, ‘juste ce qu’il en faut’ pour que chaque toile ne soit point gênée par celles qui l’entourent: cadres placés sur un seul rang, à hauteur de cimaise’”).

The reviewer went on to note the frame around a thin framed, brightly tinted or had been painted to harmonize with individual works; three or more easels, he observed, were included to display drawings and small works. Tiphérèth, “Les Récentes Expositions: . . . Néo-impressionnistes,” Le Courrier, no. 8, July 1895, 8–9.

“Répudier le luxe canaille des pompeuses bordures dorées”; H. van de Velde, “Georges Seurat,” La Wallonie (Belgium), Apr. 1891, 170.

It might be argued that the type of engagement sought by the Neo-Impressionists and Fénon was not all that different from the private ideal for Impressionism as described by Lecomte and situated in the domestic sphere of the maison Durand-Ruel: the total absorption of the viewer in the light and color and rhythm that seemed to emanate from or be generated by the painting, a condition of viewing that was only to be secured by shutting out or darkening the surrounding environment (drawing the heavy draperies in Durand-Ruel’s petit salon; imposing a thick wall screen around the canvas surface at the Independents show). As much as the friends Lecomte and Fénon shared an emphasis on the sensual immediacy of painting, however, the differences between their accounts are more important here. As described by Lecomte, the extension and dissolution of Impressionist painting into the surroundings is a spatially disorienting experience for the reader and viewer, who are simultaneously and distracted by the flickering action and ambiance created by the works. If we estimate the probable effects of Neo-Impressionist installation, the viewer seems to be distinctly separated from the image, and especially in the case of Seurat’s landscapes, the depicted scene itself is made to seem remote and otherworldly by virtue of the contrast with the heavy and dark frame. Seurat reportedly wanted to simulate in these experiments the effects of lowering the house lights at Wagner’s theater at Bayreuth, whereby the spotlit stage became the unique center of attention; E. Verhaeren, “Georges Seurat,” Société nouvelle, vii, Apr. 1891, 433. As a
Despite obvious points of resemblance, the neutrality and autonomy sought by the Neo-Impressionists are historically quite distinct from late twentieth-century modes of display. Our familiar experience of confronting in an exhibition a wall of paintings, spaciously hung in a single row, each work positioned to be viewed straight-on and to be approached so that it might fill the visual field of the beholder and (ideally) consume his or her attention, has so conditioned us that we are hard pressed to imagine why, except for lack of space or gross insensitivity, it should have ever been otherwise. By the same token, the pervasiveness of this norm makes it difficult to recapture the historical conditions in which attempts to establish the neutrality of exhibition spaces or the autonomy of easel paintings might have been as much statements against particularly powerful conjunctions in the art market, of definitions that conjoined aesthetics and private spaces, as promotions of absolute (and like our spaces, seemingly context-less) norms. Restoring the social dimensions to installation practices makes clear that the Neo-Impressionist insistence on autonomy in the late 1880s, as distinct from other moments in the history of the tableau in modernist practice, might have carried with it, or might even have been generated by, a commitment to establishing a place for avant-garde painting in a domain that was defined and experienced as public, and to accepting the distractions and diversions of such domains as conditions to be faced.

(Such a commitment is underscored by Seurat’s investigation in his works of what Meyer Schapiro called the “aesthetic aspects of popular experience”—the spectacles or spectators that Seurat painted, Schapiro noted, on a “public as opposed to a private, intimate scale.” The recent tendency to see assertions of the autonomy of art as always and simply amounting to severances of art from social life—to the ensemecement of art within museum-like spaces for aesthetic appreciation—can obscure or miss the complex history of artists’ and audiences’ responses to the variety of social spaces that constituted the nineteenth-century institutional model of how to create a sense of intimacy with the individual viewer and to concentrate his or her attention on a work to the exclusion of the distractions of a public place, Wagner’s theater no doubt appealed to Seurat.

The points made here and elsewhere on the relationship of viewer to painting are fundamentally indebted to the work of Michael Fried: see especially his Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot, Berkeley, 1980, and his Courbet’s Realism, Chicago, 1990.

By the issue of public and private continues to inform the discussion of modernism, but often with the assumption that the museum space, and its various ideologies, are what must ultimately be the bottom line. In an interview about installations at the Museum of Modern Art, William Rubin argued that modernist art was unlike art of the past, which belonged in the public spaces of palaces and churches; instead the highly individualized character of modernist work made it belong ideally in the private home, whose small spaces the museum should accordingly attempt to emulate; L. Alloway and A. Coplans, “Talking with Rubin,” Artforum, XII, 1974, 51–57. Similarly attempting to situate modernism outside the museum, Gae Aulenti recently installed the collections of the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris to re-create a variety of sites such as apartments, ateliers, and shop windows. For a critique of these positions in relation to what J.-M. Pionnot has called the ideology of the “non-lieu” (no-place) of modernism and the museum, see “Quand Foueuvre à lieu,” Parachute, XLVI, 1987, 70–77.

For Pisarro, the presentation of works was one place where distinctions could still be drawn in 1887. No doubt, for him, it was as much the social definition of a debut at Petit’s as it was the optical advantage of the white frame that provoked the crisis. The recognition that Neo-Impressionist painting might be marketed and desired in such luxurious circumstances— quasi-aristocratic, quasi-grand magasin—must have pushed him to see what it would take to be rejected. The radical connotations of painting style, it seems,

I have paid far more attention in this account to the ways that sites and installations shaped aesthetics and defined art than to how they may have been selected to bring out the characteristics of particular paintings or movements. It may also have seemed at times in this essay that nineteenth-century paintings themselves played no role in structuring an appropriate relation with the viewer or in provoking a critical discourse (an absurd position). My strong emphasis has partly resulted from a desire to set right the imbalance in art-historical studies by examining the operations of the context rather than those of the object. But, as the following and final example of installation practices is meant to suggest, such an emphasis may also be in line with the experience of artists during this period. The possibilities, polemics, and politics of painting could be subded (practically ignored) if transplanted into a properly hushed domain.

In the spring of 1887, Pisarro responded to the pressures on his finances, which he attributed to his recent adoption of the Neo-Impressionist style, and accepted an invitation from Monet and Renoir to participate in the Exposition Internationale, an annual spring event on the calendar of the salle Petit. Pisarro stipulated that his works should be bordered not in gold, but in white. Petit apparently accepted the paintings (or the name of Pisarro) but refused the frames. From the point of view of the dealer and the exhibition committee, caution was in order. The white frames that Pisarro employed at an exhibition in Nantes the previous year had been compared by a critic to the “sides of crude packing cases.” And although Pisarro proposed in letters the use of what became a Neo-Impressionist favorite—a modest white frame with narrow bands of gold at the external edges—it was apparently feared that these would disrupt the harmonies of the salle Petit.

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were less consequential than the establishment of value by display.

Pissarro succumbed in the end, but made sure that critic-friends pushed the point in the press, explaining that the gold enframing his Neo-Impressionist paintings at the salle Petit prohibited their proper perception. As a historical event, the episode is too minor to count. As a testimony of why installation had come so much to matter, it is painfully instructive.

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Frequently Cited Sources