



Monet

and American Impressionism

DULCE M. ROMÁN

WITH AN ESSAY BY NANCY MOWLL MATHEWS

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Cover, front: Claude Monet, *Champ d'avoine (Oat Field)* (detail, pl. 3), 1890

Frontispiece: Theodore Robinson, *Afternoon Shadows* (pl. 5), 1891

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Women and the Nature of Impressionism

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CLAUDE MONET once told his friend, the American Impressionist painter Lilla Cabot Perry, that “he wished he had been born blind and then had suddenly gained his sight so that he could have begun to paint . . . without knowing what the objects were that he saw before him.” He also instructed Perry: “When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you. . . . Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape, until it gives your own naïve impression of the scene before you.”¹

Monet’s comments to Perry are one of the clearest surviving statements about Impressionist principles. They conceive of painting as essentially about painting itself, so that what matters in a painting is technique and treatment of light—actual subject matter does not matter. Understood in this way, Impressionist subjects, painterly technique, and treatment have nothing to do with historical context, identity, class, gender, or nationalism. The paintings are, rather, the product of a naïve or innocent eye. When we look at a breezy, sun-drenched Impressionist painting of a field of oats (Pl. 3) or of people enjoying the leisure of a Sunday afternoon, it is easy to believe that what you see is what you get. However, the Impressionist ideal of an innocent eye has been contested, or at least problematized, by nearly every critic or scholar who has written about the “new painting,” as it was first termed.

Much of this critical inquiry has focused on the role of women and on gender.² We take up this line of questioning here in order to think about a selection of images by French and American Impressionists who were part of the art colony at Giverny

FIGURE 1. Claude Monet
(French, 1840–1926), *Woman
Seated under Willows*, 1880,
oil on canvas, 31 ¹⁵/₁₆ ×
23 ³/₈ in. (81.1 × 60 cm),
Courtesy National Gallery
of Art, Washington, D.C.,
Chester Dale Collection,
1963.10.178

FIGURE 2. Claude Monet (French, 1840–1926), *In the Woods at Giverny: Blanche Hoschedé at Her Easel with Suzanne Hoschedé Reading*, 1887, oil on canvas, 36 × 38 ½ in. (91.4 × 97.8 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. George Gard De Sylva Collection, M.46.3.4; Digital Image © 2015 Museum Associates / LACMA, Licensed by Art Resource, NY

that grew up around Monet in the 1880s and 1890s. If we assume there is more to these paintings than meets the eye, what can they tell us about cultural understandings of women, both in the depiction of women as painted subjects and as agents who render images of their own?

Monet, in his advice to Perry, would seem to be—in modern parlance—gender-blind. As recounted by Perry herself, he makes no reference to her sex, but assumes that she has access to painterly objectivity like his and possesses the artistic skills to put it into practice. Yet matters of gender have always been entirely visible to those who look for them. Already in the 1870s, French critics of Impressionism disparaged its “effeminate” emphasis on color rather than on firmly drawn figures.³ Although there was nothing intrinsically feminine in Impressionist techniques, observers could make such claims with critical effect, an effect bolstered by pointing to notable women Impressionists like Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt (Pl. 42), who were seen to paint “naturally” feminine subjects in a feminine manner.⁴ In the face of “persistent fears of Impressionist effeminacy,” Monet’s response in the 1890s was to bring a new “vigorous muscularity” to his painting, achieving what one critic termed a “victory over nature”—a nature that was implicitly understood as feminine.⁵ From the first then, gender has been central to Impressionist practice and the debates about it, even if the term *gender* only came to be used as a category for critical analysis in the later twentieth century.⁶

Matters of gender are perhaps most literally visible in the figures of women depicted in Impressionist canvases where, far from being rendered solely as “squares of blue, oblongs of pink, and streaks of yellow,” these are value-laden representations of women that embody—and sometimes complicate—normative social roles and conventional symbolic associations. Nowhere is this truer than in the Impressionist subject of the woman outdoors, a favorite of both French and American painters.⁷ These paintings, which typically show women at leisure, sometimes with their children, sitting, strolling, languorously reclining, boating, picnicking, drinking tea, present only a partial and often idealized view of women and of middle-class life.⁸ Whether in a garden or in a less-cultivated landscape setting, these representations evoke the persistent cultural myth of the intimate identification between women and nature.⁹ But social ideals—including restrictive ones—are also represented here, with women regularly appearing as passive, pliant, even decorative figures of visual delectation; only rarely are they active agents or intellectual beings.¹⁰

In *Woman Seated under Willows*, 1880 (Fig. 1), Monet hews to his own advice, treating the figure as so many moments of color. Objective though his approach may be, he depicts woman and nature as interchangeable and equivalent. Indeed, a close look at the brushwork shows that—except for a black line defining the contour of the sitter’s back—it is difficult to determine exactly where she ends and the luxurious

vegetation begins.¹¹ Yet despite this objective (even objectifying) treatment, Monet's female sitters were typically women about whom he was anything but objective; the model in this case was most likely Alice Hoschedé, his future wife.¹² In some of his other images, such as *In the Woods at Giverny: Blanche Hoschedé at Her Easel with Suzanne Hoschedé Reading*, 1887 (Fig. 2), the women possess a presence and agency that resists any easy equivalence between woman and nature.¹³ Here the models are his future stepdaughters, Blanche and Suzanne Hoschedé. Monet's representation of Blanche, herself in the act of representing a landscape *en plein air*, suggests a relationship between women and nature that is active and engaged, and as we will see,



also quite uncommon in the history of art.¹⁴ Suzanne would later marry Theodore Earl Butler (Pl. 10), who, like Lilla Cabot Perry, was part of a group of Americans gathering at Giverny after 1887, many inspired by Monet's example. Among them, the subject of woman and nature was commonly taken up by artists who employed Impressionist techniques, even as the themes they explored around this motif varied at times in unexpected ways.

One such artist is Frederick Carl Frieseke, best known for his pleasing paintings of women in garden settings, of which *Lilies*, by 1911 (Fig. 3, Pl. 11), is a prime example. Set in the garden of Le Hameau, a house that Frieseke and his wife rented at Giverny, next door to Monet, it shows one woman in a straw hat trimmed with flowers standing before an enormous bank of white lilies.¹⁵ Her informal white tea gown makes her look rather like a lily herself. The woman seated before her—probably Frieseke's wife, Sadie—wears a floral-patterned pelisse that visually rhymes with the lush, blossoming garden around them. The title of the painting reinforces the conceptual equivalence between women and nature, and seems to refer to the women as much as to the flowers. So, on one level, the painting can be read as a conventional image of woman as a form of domestic floral decoration that harmonizes with the flowery gardens. But a closer consideration of the image reveals incongruous features that strike a discordant note in a scene that is also about modern social intercourse.

This afternoon tea, served by the seated figure, takes place in a well-ordered but confined space marked by a well-tended lawn and flowerbeds, an edged walkway, and the riotous backdrop of lilies and plants screening a trellised house beyond. The lady of the house is placed squarely—even immovably—with her back to her guest, in a garden chair that creates a visual web of lines around her. As a decorative form she is thoroughly congruent with the colors of the garden, as well as the tea set before her, and becomes an extension of the agreeable domestic scene. By contrast, her guest appears awkwardly trapped on the too-narrow path between two capacious chairs—one of them faces us, empty, and markedly set apart from the tea table, the other occupied by her hostess. With her left hand placed on the back of the seated woman's chair to steady her balance and her right hand lifting her white peignoir out of harm's way from the many-colored pollens in the flowerbed, she appears unlikely to find her way forward or back. This sense of containment, the woman's slightly off-balance posture, and her gaze out at the artist/viewer, suggests—whether intentionally or not—the possibility of a certain tension or constraints in the experience of women in modern social life.¹⁶ Importantly for our purposes, this standing figure, whose white dress most suggests an affinity with nature, is ill at ease in the very garden setting that *ought* to be "home" to both flowers and to women conceptually associated with nature. Frieseke has taken up the theme of women as nature, but he ends with an image that paradoxically denaturalizes that same theme.

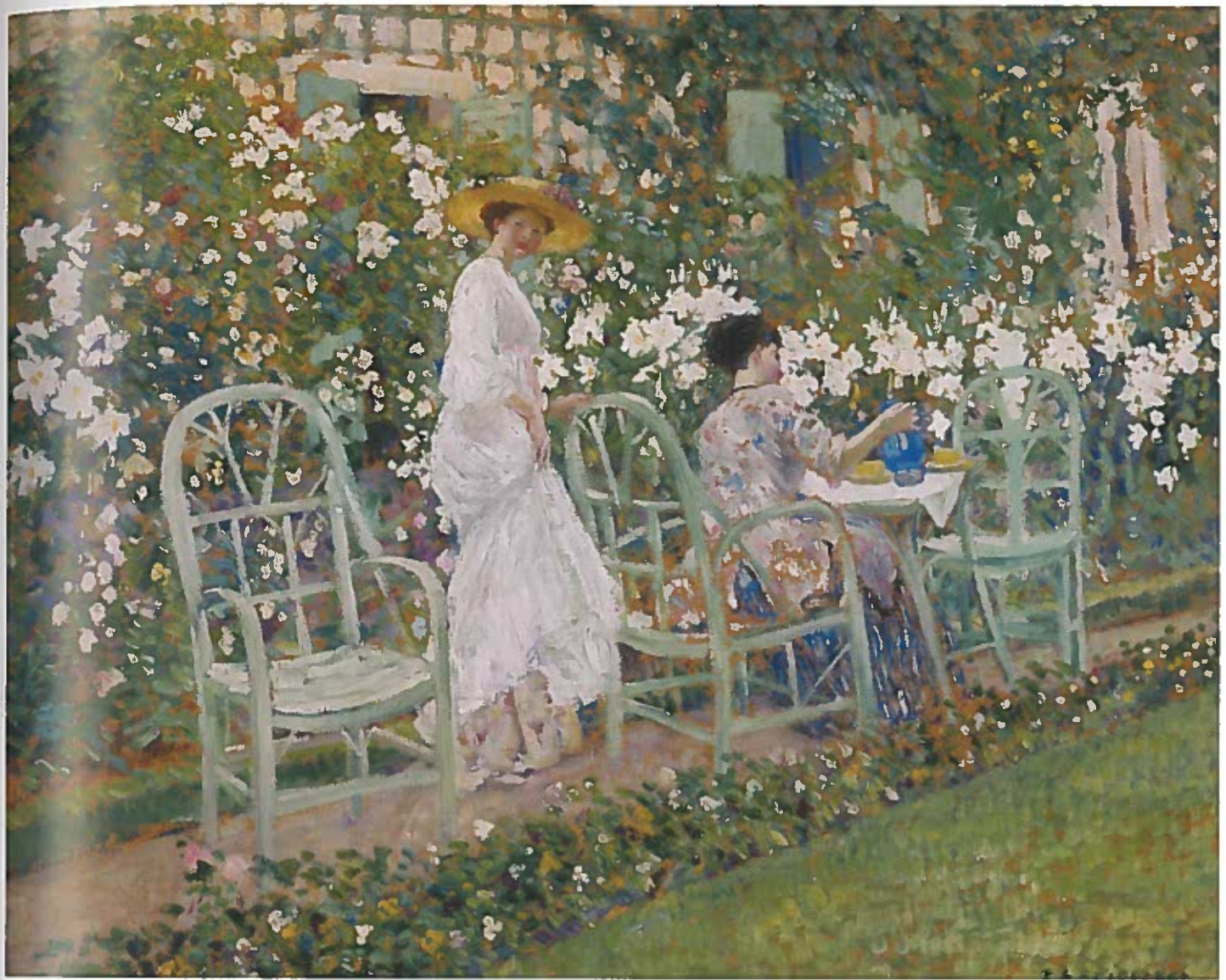


FIGURE 3, PLATE 11.
Frederick Carl Frieseke
(American, 1874–1939), *Lilies*,
by 1911, oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ \times
32 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (65.4 \times 81.6 cm), Terra
Foundation for American Art,
Daniel J. Terra Collection,
1999.55

We might view this painting and the relationship it posits between women and nature in another, slightly different, light if we consider the fact that Sadie Frieseke was an avid gardener. In other words, *Lilies* depicts a garden that was itself the product of a woman's thought and effort, so that the equivalence proposed between women and nature here evokes a nature that the woman herself had a hand in shaping, for it is *her* garden.

Other paintings in the current exhibition take up the theme of women and nature so that we see this cultural conception filtered through a range of individual responses, which can differ even within the work of a single artist. For example, Frieseke's *The Garden Umbrella*, by 1910 (Pl. 12), has none of the tensions of his *Lilies*, for here the women are so completely integrated into the landscape through brushwork and color as to blur the distinction between them and their natural surroundings.

Helen Maria Turner's *Lilies, Lanterns, and Sunshine*, 1923 (Pl. 49), though thematically similar to Frieseke's *Lilies*, presents a pleasing view of two women on a sun-dappled garden terrace, whose proximity to each other and to the picture plane (and therefore to the artist herself) suggests a sense of self-containment and cozy domestic complicity between women who seem very much in their element, which here happens to be Turner's own garden.¹⁷ Meanwhile, in Childe Hassam's ravishingly lovely *French Tea Garden* (also known as *The Terre-Cuite Tea Set*), 1910 (Pl. 35), Hassam too equates the lady with the flourishing plant life around her through his treatment of her gown and hat. At the same time, he delicately renders her face, arms, and hands in a way that distinguishes her from her surroundings, suggests interiority and individual presence, and thereby complicates the suggestion that she is merely a delicate flower. She is wearing a wedding ring, and has a thimble on her finger, as she does needlework at a tea table set for two—the painter himself being her implied companion. The painting thus explores the harmony—if not equivalence—of woman's domestic craft and the painter's creative art.¹⁸

We now want to turn to other instances in which traditional relationships between woman and nature are complicated by the intervention of woman herself. How do things change when the landscape painter is a woman? As noted earlier, Monet's depiction of a woman painting *en plein air* was uncommon, especially in France, though he painted Blanche Hoschedé painting outdoors several times. In fact, Hoschedé was, like Perry, Monet's sometime apprentice, and she quite frequently accompanied him on his painting excursions.¹⁹ He must not have been troubled by the disheveling effects of painting outdoors, as Berthe Morisot's husband, Eugène Manet, had been. In a letter of 1875 to her sister, Morisot reported that she had had to abandon her efforts to paint in the open air during a holiday excursion in England, after a frightful wind blew her hat off and her hair got in her eyes. She wrote: "Eugène was in a bad humour as he always is when my hair is in disorder."²⁰ Three hours after setting out, they were back in their holiday cottage. This incident hints at some of the proprieties that made it difficult for women to practice landscape painting at all. Though Morisot managed to do quite a bit of it anyway, the very conditions necessary for producing an Impressionist landscape were anything but gender-blind. Concern for the niceties of appearance would have been beyond imagining in the case of a Monet. In fact, his battling of the elements for hours on end is very much a part of the heroism of his victories over nature. Significantly, too, Morisot's anecdote reminds us that she was accompanied by her husband. Unlike male artists, women lacked the "freedom to go about alone," as the painter Marie Bashkirtseff once lamented.²¹

Perhaps by the late nineteenth century cultural attitudes had changed or were

different enough in the United States that the obstacles faced by women like Turner and Perry were less daunting when they took up painting landscapes.²² Like most Impressionists, Turner did a great many figures *en plein air*, but she also painted “pure” landscapes. These tend to depict the garden of her own house at Cragmoor.²³ Perry’s *paysages*, such as *A Stream Beneath Poplars*, circa 1890–1900 (Pl. 1), venture beyond her own domestic sphere, though sometimes they only appear to do so, as in the case of *Landscape in Normandy*, 1890 (Pl. 2). A letter from her husband, Thomas Perry, to a family friend reveals that she painted *Landscape in Normandy* one fine August day from the window of his room in their Giverny house. Thus *Landscape in Normandy* might be said to represent a woman’s point of view, not in the essentialist way one finds in nineteenth-century criticism, but in the sense that Perry’s act of painting from the confines of her husband’s room can be understood as an instance in which a woman literally painted from a position that would not have been adopted by most male *plein air* painters.²⁴ Her physical position comports with the social positioning of women in the domestic sphere, while the composition of the painting itself suggests the contrary, namely, that what we see is a view of the out-of-doors painted out-of-doors.²⁵ This is what most of Perry’s landscapes actually were: *plein air* landscapes in the usual sense, and in this she was unusual as a woman artist.

In fact, Perry was an exceptional figure on a number of counts. She began her painting career late, at the age of thirty-nine, at which time she had been married for ten years and had three small children. All of this was exceedingly rare for a woman artist, since most women who chose the challenging life of a professional artist elected to remain single. Rarer still, she also became the breadwinner in the family.²⁶ Portraits were her primary source of income, and she frequently painted everyday scenes of women and children (including her own), “feminine” subjects that were preferred by other women associated with Impressionism, whether by choice or by necessity.²⁷ It is clear, though, that Perry’s genre of choice was landscape. She returned to it almost exclusively during the Roaring Twenties, when she was in her eighties. By that time she was at last free to do as she pleased, as she explained in a letter to her friend Bernard Berenson: “Thank Heaven I can in my old age give up the bondage of painting portraits. . . . I am devoting my small remaining strength to what Monet begged me to do and said was my forte: Pleine Air [*sic*] and Paysages.”²⁸

In closing, then, we wish to emphasize that landscapes by Perry and by other women of her time are quite uncommon in the history of art. By virtue of their very existence, such paintings are remarkable and, like those of their male counterparts, inflected with a whole set of cultural meanings that circulate around women (and men), nature, and landscape painting, confirming that there is much more to these pictures than first meets the eye.

Notes

1. Lilla Cabot Perry, "Reminiscences of Claude Monet from 1889 to 1909," *American Magazine of Art*, March 1927, 119–25, reprinted in Meredith Martindale, Pamela Moffat, and Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Lilla Cabot Perry: An American Impressionist* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in Art, 1990), 116.
2. Of the vast literature on this subject, some of the most important examples include Tamar Garb, *Women Impressionists* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986); Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 50–90; Anne Higonnet, *Berthe Morisot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Norma Broude, *Impressionism: A Feminist Reading* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991); Ruth E. Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Mary Cassatt* (New York: Abrams in association with the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1987).
3. Anthea Callen, "Technique and Gender: Landscape, Ideology and the Art of Monet in the 1890s," in *Gendering Landscape Art*, ed. Steven Adams and Anna Gruetzner Robins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 42.
4. Tamar Garb, "Berthe Morisot and the Feminizing of Impressionism," in *Perspectives on Morisot*, ed. T. J. Edelstein (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 57–66.
5. Callen notes that Monet turns from painting figures in landscapes to painting his subjects in series, such as the famous Rouen cathedral series, and the *Grainstacks*. Callen says the "vigorous muscularity of Monet's facture . . . serves to distance him from the effeminacy associated with the painterly touch of a Renoir or a Morisot" ("Technique and Gender," 41).
6. See Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75.
7. See John House, "Women Out of Doors," in *Women in Impressionism: From Mythical Feminine to Modern Woman*, ed. Sidsel Maria Sondergaard (Milan: Skira, 2006), 157–223. Men, of course, are represented in many Impressionist scenes of leisure, and their depiction is no less subject to analysis in terms of gender. However, depictions of women, singly or in small groups, were particularly favored by many Impressionists.
8. For discussion see, in this volume, Louise M. Newman, "The 'Woman Question' in American Impressionist Painting, 1880–1920."
9. Tamar Garb, "Renoir and the Natural Woman," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), 295–311.
10. Garb has observed that unlike their male counterparts, "women Impressionists presented images of women resonant with dignity and self-containment" (*Women Impressionists*, 26).
11. Indeed, Monet had declared his intention to paint figures "like a landscape." Quoted in *The Annenberg Collection: Masterpieces of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, ed. Susan Alyson Stein and Asher Ethan Miller (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 79.
12. Mary Mathews Gedo, *Monet and His Muse: Camille Monet in the Artist's Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 215.
13. For discussion of this issue see Stein and Miller, *The Annenberg Collection*, 79–80.
14. Concerning the iconography, we have been able to identify only a handful of paintings from this era of women shown working *en plein air*, none of them French: Alfred James Munnings, *Laura Knight Painting* (undated); John Singer Sargent, *Jane Emmet and Wilfred de Glehn at the Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati* (undated); John Sloan, *Helen Taylor Sketching* (1916); Joaquín Sorolla, *Maria*

Painting in El Pardo (1907); Alfred Stevens, *Painting at the Beach* (1880); and David Woodlock, *A Landscape Painter* (undated). One notable French image of women painting landscapes is to be found in a fashion plate from *Le Moniteur de la mode*, 1886, which shows two stylish Parisian coquettes in a landscape, one seated before a tiny easel, the other holding her painterly accoutrements like fashion accessories. Here landscape painting is presented as a fashionable amateur practice that provides a pretext for appearing in the latest fashions for the outdoors. See Marie Simon, *Mode et peinture: Le Second Empire et l'impressionnisme* (Paris: Hazan, 1995), 66.

15. This is the same house that the Perrys rented for nine summers. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, *Colección Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza*, ed. Javier Arnaldo, vol. 2 (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2004), 222.

16. For a different reading of this painting see discussion on the website for the Terra Foundation of Art, <http://www.terraamericanart.org>.

17. Pollock argues in "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" that proximity and compositional compression are features of the work of other female Impressionists. See also note 10.

18. Gari Melchers's *Unpretentious Garden*, 1903–1909 (Pl. 46), Theodore Robinson's *Gathering Plums*, 1891 (Pl. 7), and Robert Vonnoh's *Jardin de paysanne (Peasant Garden)*, 1890 (Pl. 6)—treat class and labor in the context of gardens, orchards, and peasant houses in interesting ways that space will not allow us to explore here.

19. She had a long and successful career as a landscape painter. Sophie Fourny-Dargère, *Blanche Hoschedé Monet, 1865–1947: Une Artiste de Giverny*, exh. catalogue, April 2–June 6, 1991 (Vernon, France: Musée municipal, 1991). See also Philippe Piguet, *Blanche Hoschedé-Monet, un destin impressionniste* (Rouen: Editions Points de vues, 2010).

20. Quoted in Higonet, *Berthe Morisot*, 130.

21. Marie Bashkirtseff, *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff* (London: Virago Press, 1985), 347. We are aware of only two late-nineteenth-century examples of women landscape painters depicted by women, namely, by a Norwegian, Kitty Kielland, and by a Dane, Caroline Mundt; in the other images of women painting landscapes, listed in note 14, the women are in essence accompanied by the men painting them, even when shown alone.

22. In 1871, *Godey's Lady's Book* published an article titled "Painting as a Profession for Women," which looked favorably on the possibility but also asserted that "the working conditions of a landscape artist or illustrator—painting or drawing outdoors, sometimes living in a tent—were 'obviously impossible for a woman,' especially an unmarried woman." Quoted in Sue Rainey, *Creating Picturesque America* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994), 105.

23. Jane Ward Faquin, *Helen M. Turner: The Woman's Point of View* (Memphis: Dixon Gallery and Gardens, 2010). A photograph showing Turner painting in her own garden can be found in Carol Lowrey, *A Legacy of Art: Paintings and Sculptures by Artist Life Members of the National Arts Club* (New York: Hudson Hill, 2007), 183.

24. Perry comments that she only once saw Monet paint indoors. Martindale, Moffat, and Mathews, *Lilla Cabot Perry*, 117.

25. Not only is Perry assuming a view at her husband's window, but Thomas Perry also noted that she depicted a field that Monet often painted. In effect, the position she takes within the home for this particular canvas has her seeing from her husband's vantage point what Monet saw. *Ibid.*, 28.

26. As pointed out in *ibid.*, 105–8.

27. Women only painted certain Impressionist subjects—not nudes or prostitutes. See Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity."

28. Quoted in Martindale, Moffat, and Mathews, *Lilla Cabot Perry*, 96.