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Portrait of Same-Sex Desire: Lesbian (Mis)Representations in Nineteenth-Century French Art

Jessica N. Mummert

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In *On Prostitution in the City of Paris*, Alexander Parent-Duchatelet stated that “one cannot distinguish tribades from their exteriors.”¹ However, lesbians were soon to become hypervisible through the work of many male artists who took it upon themselves to define who a lesbian was, what she looked like, and the kind of behaviors she engaged in. The social climate of late nineteenth-century France created an environment where lesbian art could court just enough controversy while still participating in a larger cultural conversation, as lesbians became a heightened topic of interest. Scientific discourse, prostitution, first-wave feminism, the falling birth rate, and lesbianism itself provoked disquiet about the degeneration of Third Republic society, especially in relation to female sexuality.² Lesbian imagery communicated concerns over sexuality, morality, feminism, class and gender roles, making lesbians mirrors upon which French societal anxieties were reflected. Some artworks depicted lesbians more genuinely, but nevertheless, lesbian art often relied on the sexualization of the lesbian subject, turning lesbians into objects to be consumed by the—mostly male—viewing public. Male artists presented stereotypical, voyeuristic, and ultimately non-representative images of lesbians to engage with and get the attention of a society simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by these women.

The historiography of this topic is pieced together from multiple sources and perspectives—literary, artistic, scientific, social, and historical. However, there is an overall consensus, which this paper reflects, that nineteenth-century France’s focus on lesbians partially

¹ Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchatelet, *Prostitution in the City of Paris*, trans. Roger Ridley-Smith (Wellington, New Zealand: The Translator, 2008), 100, quoted in Chiara Beccalossi, “Female Same-Sex Desires: Conceptualizing a Disease in Competing Medical Fields in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 67, no.1 (January 2012): 30.

² Leslie Choquette, “Degenerate or Degendered? Images of Prostitution and Homosexuality in the French Third Republic,” *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 217-19; Bonnie G. Smith, “Gender and the Republic,” in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*, eds. Edward Berenson, Vincent Duclert, and Christophe Prochasson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 302.

stemmed from the Third Republic's concerns about criminality and prostitution.³ Using lesbianism to discuss fears of societal degeneration and female hypersexuality is prominent in artworks, as explained by Richard Thomson, Dorothy M. Kosinski, and Leslie Choquette.⁴ Additionally, scholars tend to agree, if not always explicitly state, that representations of lesbians relied on their sexualization. This paper extends this concept to works beyond the erotic, building off of Kosinski's argument that lesbian artworks demonstrated men's fantasies about women.⁵ Many scholars also note the Third Republic's concerns over female sexuality and/or feminism and its potential to pose a threat to social order, an idea which is fully translated to the realm of art here. Victoria Thompson writes that fears about social stability after the Revolution of 1848 led to increased policing of gender and sexual norms, while Thomson states that lesbian art reflected fears about women's sexuality that were initially expressed in social and scientific discourse.⁶

My categorical analysis of lesbian artworks is inspired by Nicole G. Albert's work in *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-siècle France*.⁷ Albert's book supplied many of the images used here, which would have been near-impossible to find otherwise. Leslie Choquette is another key influence for this paper, as she is a prominent historian writing on lesbian representation in nineteenth-century France. While her work tends to focus on actual gay and lesbian life in Paris, rather than close analyses of art, Choquette does draw attention to the stereotypical ways in which lesbians were viewed and provides vital contextual information on the lesbian experience in the city.⁸

Lesbian art historiography tends to focus on one mode of representation at a time or discusses lesbian art en masse, without multi-categorical synthesis. This scholarship has highlighted some types of representation and the social circumstances that produced such art, but has limited analysis of the diverse methods of portraying lesbianism. Addressing these gaps, this paper will examine four distinct lesbian representations while also showing how they all were part of a (very heterosexual male biased) cultural conversation on lesbians. By synthesizing

³ See Gretchen Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers: Discourses of Same-Sex Desire from Nineteenth-Century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 19; Victoria Thompson, "Creating Boundaries: Homosexuality and the Changing Social Order in France, 1830-1870," in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, eds. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 12; Beccalossi, "Female Same-Sex Desires," 27-8; Nicole G. Albert, *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-siècle France* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2016), 98; Francesca Canadé Sautman, "Invisible Women: Lesbian Working-Class Culture in France, 1880-1930," in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, eds. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10; Choquette, "Degenerate or Degendered?," 219.

⁴ See Leslie Choquette, "Homosexuals in the City: Representations of Lesbian and Gay Space in Nineteenth-Century Paris," *Journal of Homosexuality* 41, no. 3/4 (2001): 157-61; Dorothy M. Kosinski, "Gustave Courbet's 'The Sleepers.' The Lesbian Image in Nineteenth-Century French Art and Literature," *Artibus et Historiae* 9, no. 18 (1988): 192-5; Choquette, "Homosexuals in the City," 152; Richard Thomson, *The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), chap. 1.

⁵ Kosinski, "The Sleepers," 197.

⁶ Thompson, "Creating Boundaries," 13; Thomson, *The Troubled Republic*, chap. 1. ⁷ See Albert, *Lesbian Decadence*, 159-72.

⁷ See Albert, *Lesbian Decadence*, 159-72.

⁸ See Choquette, "Homosexuals in the City."

different categories of lesbian art in the context of societal trends and concerns, this paper will illuminate central facets of lesbian representation, demonstrating how lesbianism specifically, and gender and sexuality in general, has been conceptualized, policed, and consumed in France and what this means for queer women, even today. It will also contribute to the limited historical research conducted on French queer history, especially regarding queer women.

Through the examination of multiple nineteenth-century artworks by male artists, this paper will highlight four key lesbian figures: the hypersexual lesbian, the lesbian prostitute, the masculine lesbian, and the bourgeois lesbian. Before delving into these categories, I will discuss how men came to control the artistic conversation on lesbians, what “lesbian” meant at the time, and the terms that I use in this paper. After my analyses of the four tropes, I will conclude by looking at two pieces by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec that show the possibility of better lesbian representation, in the past and in the future.

I focus on male artists because there are no lesbian artworks created by women, much less lesbians, from this time. Women were largely excluded from art as a career, and were prohibited from taking life drawing classes for almost the entire nineteenth century due to their perceived “inappropriate” nature, meaning that they would not have had much chance to paint naked women.⁹ Two of the most famous nineteenth-century French female artists, Rosa Bonheur and Louise Abbéma, could be considered queer today—the former had a long-term female partner and the latter was reported to be actress Sarah Bernhardt’s lover—but, interestingly, neither ever painted a lesbian scene.¹⁰ Presumably, these and other women did not represent lesbians to avoid controversy beyond what they would have already garnered as female artists. Painting lesbians could have also stirred speculation that they were lesbians themselves, which was, as these images will show, viewed quite negatively. Women—whether lesbians or not—did not have the luxury of engaging in artistic discourse on lesbians. Of course, straight women’s art could have been just as homophobic as men’s, but lesbian’s apparent inability to represent themselves is a major loss. Male artists, guided by the concepts of male-dominated society, were able to misrepresent lesbians in a variety of ways with no contrasting narrative.

Men controlled the conversation on lesbianism all the way down to its names. *Lesbienne*, *saphiste*, and *tribade* were typical nineteenth-century French terms for lesbians.¹¹ *Lesbienne* and *saphiste*, deriving from the ancient Greek poet Sappho and her home island Lesbos, were associated with oral sex, while *tribade* was associated with the rubbing of the genitals together (tribadism).¹² Definitions of lesbianism were not just suggestive, but also judgmental. In Alfred Delvau’s *Dictionnaire Erotique Moderne*, he defines a lesbian as “a woman who *has her way sexually* with another woman” (my emphasis).¹³ Clearly, the naming of lesbianism reflects a

⁹ Nicole Myers, “Women Artists in Nineteenth-Century France,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, last modified September 2008, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/19wa/hd_19wa.htm.

¹⁰ “Rosa Bonheur,” The National Gallery, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rosabonheur>; “Louise Abbéma,” National Museum of Women in the Arts, <https://nmwa.org/art/artists/louise-abbema/>.

¹¹ Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers*, 7.

¹² Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers*, 6-7; Sautman, “Invisible Women,” 3.

¹³ Alfred Delvau, *Dictionnaire érotique moderne* (Bâle: Imprimerie de Karl Schmidt, n.d.), 359, translated and quoted in Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers*, 7.

hyper-focus on sex between women. What it does not focus on, however, is the *exclusivity* of these sexual practices. It is not made clear if lesbians were thought to be solely attracted to women, as they are today, or if the term “lesbian” was applied to any woman who had sex with other women, even if she also had relationships with men. Since the representations here demonstrate specifically female/female relationships, I use the terms “lesbian,” “lesbianism,” and “female same-sex desire/attraction,” but it is to be understood that modern and historical definitions may not align. When discussing the legacy of these representations, I often use “queer women” to emphasize that portrayals of lesbians at this time impact how women who are attracted to women—exclusively or not—are seen, even to this day.

The Hypersexual Lesbian

Just as lesbian terminology centered on sex acts, so did lesbian art. In particular, much lesbian art relied on the trope of the “damned women,” painting lesbians as women overtaken by lust. Although these artworks are far from scientific, their basis can be found in the nineteenth-century medicalization of lesbianism. Continental physicians generally agreed that same-sex desire was a sign of degeneracy, but France had its own unique conceptualization of lesbianism, thanks to Alexander Parent-Duchatelet.¹⁴ The famous physician and hygienist led the conversation on lesbians with his 1836 study, *On Prostitution in the City of Paris*, where he paid much attention to the same-sex relationships of the city’s prostitutes, describing lesbianism as an invisible, untreatable “contagion.”¹⁵ Lesbian erotica and the “damned women” trope can be seen as a sexy version of lesbianism as a disease, making the ‘illness’ visible through erotic imagery and likening its incurability to an unavoidable hedonistic fate. Some erotica was less negative than others, but all operated as a way for men to center themselves in lesbianism, ensuring that even if lesbians were not damned for their sexuality, they would still be damned to serve men.

The pathologization of lesbians did not excuse them from being eroticized; rather, it enabled artists and writers alike to comment on their degenerate ways in a profitably salacious way. Auguste Rodin’s *Femmes Damnées* sculpture, likely borrowing its title from Charles Baudelaire’s lesbian poems of the same name, shows two women in an erotic embrace (fig. 1).¹⁶ The dark cast of the bronze, their writhing limbs, and the rock they lay on project the idea that if these “damned women” are not in Hell already, they are certainly heading there. Equally erotically and negatively charged, this statue turns lesbians into titillating sinners, condemning them in name yet capitalizing on their acts. Lesbian pulp fiction of this era functioned in the same way, with men writing lesbians as “monsters of depraved appetite” and banking on viewers’ obsession with these women, whether as horrific or arousing examples of female sexuality gone wrong.¹⁷ The three-dimensional nature of the statue also invites viewers to

¹⁴ Beccalossi, “Female Same-Sex Desires,” 14.

¹⁵ Beccalossi, “Female Same-Sex Desires,” 27-9.

¹⁶ Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers*, 41.

¹⁷ Waelti-Walters, *Damned Women*, 49.

examine the women in a way similar to doctors, “studying” them in the most objectifying way possible.



Fig. 1, Auguste Rodin, *Femmes Damnées*, Bronze, ca. 1885-1890, Brooklyn Museum, New York, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/113813>.

While the women in *L'Esprit du Mal*, or, in English, *The Spirit of Evil*, are not yet as far gone as Rodin's lovers, they are certainly approaching that threshold (fig. 2). The witch-like figure hiding in the corner is the evil spirit of lesbianism personified; her gaze follows the crouching woman's hand on the other's buttocks, making sure the viewer knows exactly where the sin lies. Their outdoor location, at best, marks these women as playful nymphs engaging in a charming romp; at worst, it likens them to animals. Either way, their sexuality is styled as something removed from humankind and imbued with a mythical or primal quality, an impression which is enhanced by the tree-like witch figure. The open-air setting also explicitly evokes voyeurism, as if the viewer has just come across these women while walking outside. The white smoke drifting up the center could be viewed as a miasma, poisoning the air—and then the women—with lesbianism, calling back to the idea of female same-sex attraction as a disease. The building in the background appears to be a church, with its spire and Gothic arched windows. The church, looming in the background like a watchful figure, could be a suggestion that what these women are doing is a direct affront to traditional morality or that they have rejected those rules, literally leaving them behind to run off into the woods together. Taken altogether, especially with its unique style, the overall impression of this image is that of a fairytale—one for heterosexual men, telling the story of two women enchanted by lesbianism, casting them as both villains and victims in this erotic tale.

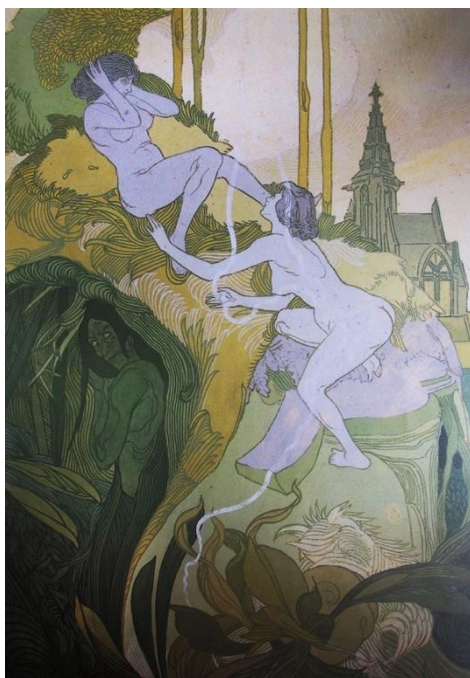


Fig. 2, George de Feure, *L'Esprit du Mal*, 1897-1898, in *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-siècle France*, by Nicole G. Albert, Plate XI, New York: Harrington Park Press, 2016;
https://www.autostraddle.com/wpcontent/uploads/2017/09/30LD_X.-George-de-Feure-L'Esprit-du-mal_1500px__300.jpg.

Some works, like Gustave Courbet's *The Sleepers*, were erotic without being condemnatory at all, highlighting women's sexuality as a positive thing—as long as it still served male sexual fantasies. In this painting, two naked women sleep draped around each other in a luxurious setting (fig. 3). The broken string of pearls, lone hairpin, and rumpled sheets suggests that they have exhausted themselves in their sexual exploits. The composition of the painting and the women's bodies makes one feel as if they have snuck into the women's bedroom to gaze at them, which is perhaps the entire point. It was, in fact, commissioned by an erotica collector and one of the women is based on model Joanna Hiffenan, lover of Courbet's contemporary James McNeill Whistler, and possibly Courbet himself.¹⁸ This erotic image demonstrates how men—artists and viewers alike—fantasized about women, using lesbianism as just another way to sexualize them in service of male heterosexuality.¹⁹ Representing lesbians was often not about lesbians at all, but about what women could offer to men as sex objects, their actual sexualities be damned.

¹⁸ Kosinski, “The Sleepers,” 197; “Joanna Hiffenan, ca. 1843-??” *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, University of Glasgow, https://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/people/biog/?bid=Hiff_J&initial=H.

¹⁹ Kosinski, “The Sleepers,” 197.



Fig. 3, Gustave Courbet, *The Sleepers*, Oil on canvas, 1866, Le Petit Palais, Paris, <https://www.sartle.com/artwork/the-sleepers-gustave-courbet>.

The Lesbian Prostitute

Lesbianism was also altered to service male heterosexuality while condemning another perceived social and moral threat: prostitution. Alexander Parent-Duchatelet again inspired this trope with his work in *On Prostitution in the City of Paris*. Describing prostitutes as women “whose depraved and unnatural tastes lead them to choose as a lover someone of their own sex,” he stated that prostitution encouraged lesbian “proclivities” to come out, often as the result of an older prostitute seducing a young one.²⁰ The hybrid figure of the lesbian prostitute, with her twin pathologies, was the perfect character for a society concerned with disease, morality, and female sexuality to latch onto. Prostitutes were already pictured as signs of social and sexual degeneracy, and adding lesbianism to the mix only made them more threatening—or alluring.²¹ As dangerous as she was, her scandalous profession and sexuality made sure that the lesbian prostitute was always sexualized, put on display for the male gaze.

Prostitution and lesbianism were cast in similar lights, categorized as inherent sexual degeneracies, with the former leading to the latter—by triggering predispositioned homosexual desires—and threatening to spread further into society.²² *Les Tribades* is an illustrative example of the corrupting evil of prostitution in Taxil’s *La Prostitution Contemporaine: Étude d’une Question Sociale* (fig. 4). The caption reads: “Jealousy, between girls adored in the vice of sapphism, often causes quarrels, and sometimes real duels, in which the most used weapon is the hair comb.” The woman in the middle, standing protectively over her lover, appears to have just hit the woman facing her as two other women watch from the corner. Lesbianism is portrayed as

²⁰ Beccalossi, “Female Same-Sex Desires,” 28-9.

²¹ Choquette, “Degenerate or Degendered?” 219.

²² Beccalossi, “Female Same-Sex Desires,” 28.

doubly sinful, being a vice in and of itself and causing envy, high tempers, and catfights (between scantily clad prostitutes with their breasts hanging out, of course). The brothel setting also highlights Taxil's idea that brothels were veritable breeding grounds for lesbianism.²³ Working beyond the primary threat of prostitution-lesbianism merely spreading out of the brothel and infecting society, the illustration particularly shows the drama and violence that lesbianism engenders, warning viewers of its threat to order.

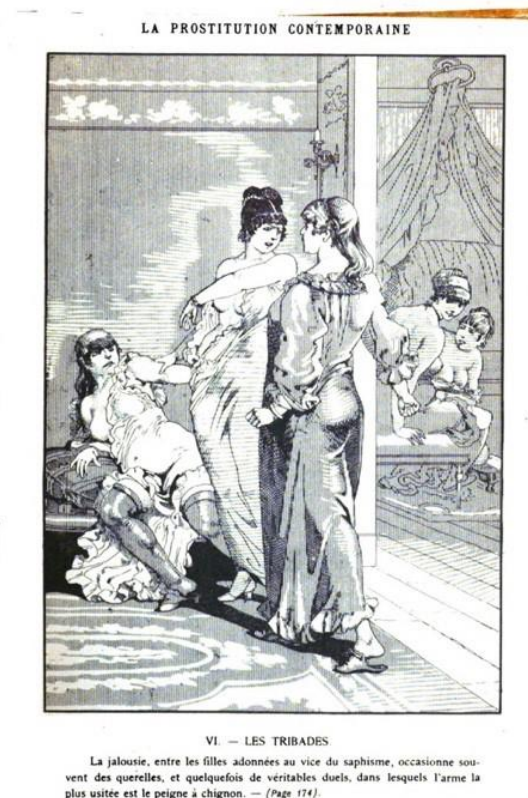


Fig. 4, Léon Choubrac, *Les Tribades*, in *La Prostitution Contemporaine: Étude d'une Question Sociale*, by Léo Taxil, Figure VI, Paris: Libraire Populaire, 1884, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101069163101&view=1up&seq=21&q1=Les%20tribades>.

Not all art featuring the lesbian prostitute was necessarily negative. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *Les Deux Amies*, also set in a brothel, cuts a more sympathetic figure of lesbian prostitutes (fig. 5).²⁴ The title translates to “The Two Girlfriends” —meaning friends that are girls, not girls who are dating—suggesting that friendship is the most important bond here, rather than their sexual relationship. Although the women may have had or are going to have sex, given their positions, states of dress, and the discarded clothing in the corner, the painting is not

²³ Léo Taxil, *La Prostitution Contemporaine: Étude d'une Question Sociale* (Paris: Libraire Populaire, 1884), 172, translated and quoted in Thompson, “Creating Boundaries,” 11.

²⁴ Kosinski, “The Sleepers,” 152.

focused on the sexual nature of their bodies. The nude woman is turned away in a relaxed pose, suggesting her comfort with the seated women, who gives a knowing glance to the viewer, almost like she is sharing a funny little secret. The crux of the painting lies in her engagement—and her companion’s disengagement—with the viewer, shifting their presentation from lesbian prostitutes as sex objects or paragons of sin to lesbian prostitutes as people. Toulouse-Lautrec lived in brothels for most of the two years prior to this painting’s creation, and his experience likely led to a more natural, positive depiction of these women.²⁵ Being more intimate with prostitutes’ “behind-the-scenes lives” allowed him to reflect the reality that he saw rather than rely on his imagination, as others did.²⁶ While the painting does confirm what Parent-Duchatelet and Taxil argued—that prostitutes engaged in lesbian relations—it does not do so in a dramatized way designed merely to feed the stereotypes surrounding lesbian prostitutes.

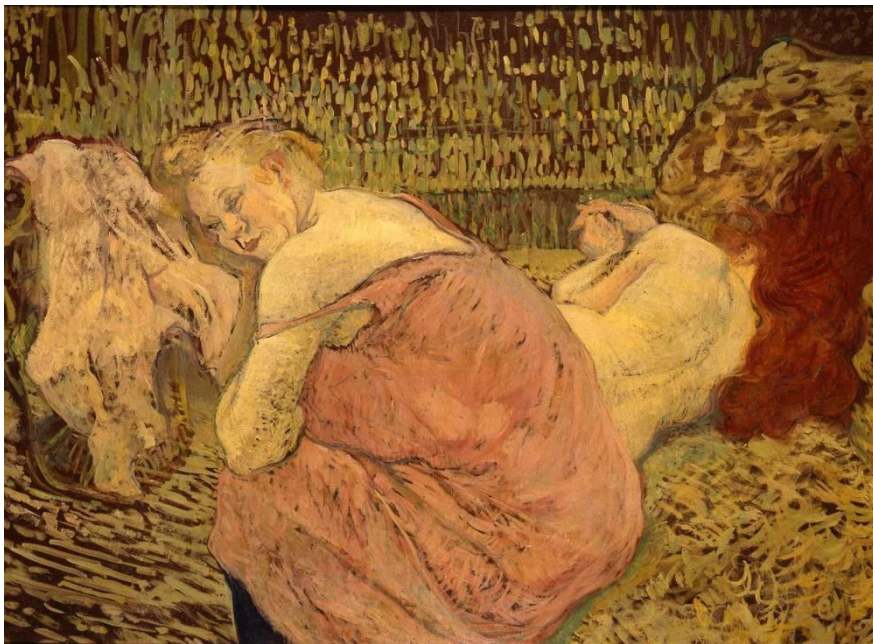


Fig. 5, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Les Deux Amies*, Oil on cardboard on wood, 1895, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Dresden, <https://skd-onlinecollection.skd.museum/Details/Index/326902>.

Nevertheless, while this piece does not draw on common lesbian tropes nearly as much as others, it did function as a product of its time, and was presumably seen as just as scandalous as any other lesbian and/or prostitute work. In his 1896 show at the Galerie Manzi-Joyant, Toulouse-Lautrec kept his lesbian and brothel artworks in a private room reserved for friends and clients, most likely to avoid censorship.²⁷ It could be that Toulouse-Lautrec and those whom he chose to view the paintings held equally accepting views on lesbians and prostitutes, but it is just as likely that his audience was merely vetted as liberal enough to enjoy the artwork, which does

²⁵ Choquette, “Homosexuals in the City,” 159.

²⁶ Kosinski, “The Sleepers,” 190.

²⁷ Thomson, *The Troubled Republic*, chap. 1.

not exclude them from independently fetishizing lesbians. Putting the works in a private room could have also communicated an additional layer of suggestiveness, reminding viewers how they were seeing things thought to be too improper for the general public. Even though the artist himself moved away from themes of degeneracy and hypersexuality, the way his art would have been consumed—in context with numerous other artworks, not to mention social discourse, that *did* objectify and condemn lesbians—probably rendered any of Toulouse-Lautrec’s intentions of a more authentic portrayal useless.

Other works stepped away from serious conversations on or more genuine portrayals of lesbians, maintaining the typical hypersexual mode of portrayal. The only real hint that the women in Edgar Degas’ *Deux Femmes (Scène de maison close)* are prostitutes is that the parenthetical translates to “scene from a brothel” (fig. 6). The women are a blur, obviously naked and in some sort of embrace that is, of course, not a close enough one to prevent the woman on the left from being entirely laid out for the viewer. The obstruction of their faces and environment, perhaps just a byproduct of a quick sketch, nevertheless drives the point home that it does not actually matter who these women are. They could be any prostitutes in any brothel, simultaneously emphasizing the idea that lesbians had infiltrated common spaces of male pleasure and that, like prostitutes, lesbians could still be a source of said pleasure through voyeurism. These women’s real identities and experiences did not matter when men purely needed them for their bodies.



Fig. 6, Edgar Degas, *Deux Femmes (Scène de maison close)*, Monotype on paper, ca. 1877-79, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/167826>.

The Masculine Lesbian

Although male artists often portrayed lesbians in erotic and fantastical ways, many other artworks more clearly demonstrated the supposed threat that lesbianism posed to men and society. Here, concerns about lesbianism met with concerns over first-wave feminism, as both

were threatening to male dominance.²⁸ Men, already threatened by the falling birth rate and the resultant perceived weakness of the nation, were invested in maintaining traditional gender roles and family structure.²⁹ However, by pursuing equality, women could free themselves from the confines of the home and enter into the social sphere, engaging in activities independent from men.³⁰ And by having relationships with women—an activity incredibly independent from men—lesbian women not only revoked men’s access to them, but entered into what men viewed as a competition for other women.³¹ Representations of lesbians centered around the feelings of emasculation and jealousy that they provoked in men, often doing more to reveal heterosexual male insecurities than to actually make lesbianism look unappealing.

Lesbianism and feminism were also negatively associated with masculinity. Female same-sex desire was medically categorized as a sign of gender abnormality, or inversion (meaning women who wanted to be, or at least acted like, men).³² This medical classification translated into a social categorization as well, establishing the butch lesbian: the “man” of the relationship, who dresses and acts in direct opposition to feminine norms. Resisting femininity—especially through more modern, less feminine dress that was associated with increased independence—was also seen as a part of feminism.³³ Feminism was considered to be desexualizing, turning women into unattractive, unfeminine creatures that both rejected and repulsed men, much like lesbians.³⁴ Conflating lesbianism with feminism, and linking both to appropriative masculinity, men were able to characterize these “modern” women as a threat to traditional gender norms and relations.

The fear that women were co-opting masculinity and rejecting men as part of a lesbian-feminist agenda is communicated in Gabriel de Laumont’s *Don Juan Moderne*. This modern Don Juan is not the traditional man of legend, but a woman (fig. 7). She sports a fashionably masculine suit, hat, and necktie, items which marked a woman as, at best, a feminist who was disinterested in men, and at worst, a lesbian.³⁵ Well-dressed women in typical feminine clothing flock around her as they would an attractive man, suggesting that she has stolen their affections, perhaps even “turned” them gay. By centering themselves around a masculinely attired woman, they have turned their backs on men. This image speaks to the antifeminist anxiety that “New Women” were rejecting femininity and embracing masculinity—thus rejecting heterosexuality and embracing lesbianism—thereby erasing gender difference and endangering the heteropatriarchal family.³⁶

²⁸ Waelti-Walters, *Damned Women*, 53-4.

²⁹ Thomson, *The Troubled Republic*, chap. 1.

³⁰ Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers*, 119.

³¹ Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers*, 5.

³² Beccalossi, “Female Same-Sex Desires,” 16.

³³ Waelti-Walters, *Damned Women*, 53.

³⁴ Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers*, 120.

³⁵ Albert, *Lesbian Decadence*, 159.

³⁶ Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers*, 119-120.

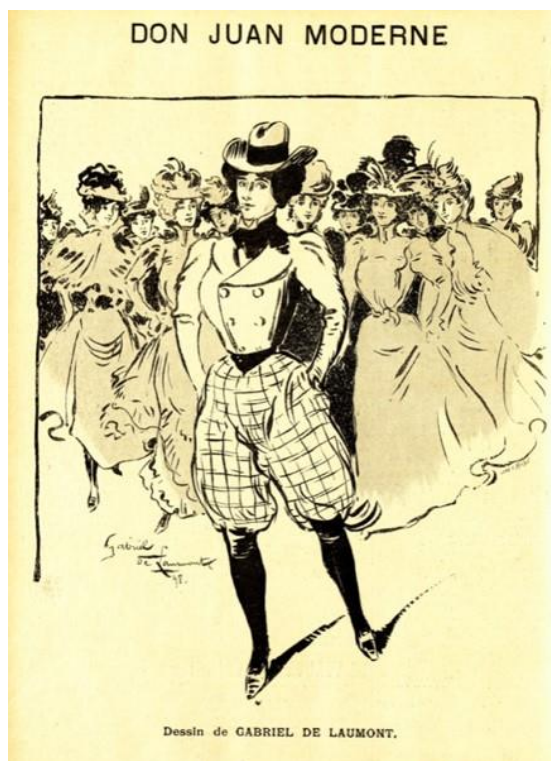


Fig. 7, Gabriel de Laumont, *Don Juan Moderne*, in *Gil Blas Illustré*, November 4, 1893, in *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-siecle France*, by Nicole G. Albert, Figure 8.1, New York: Harrington Park Press, 2016; <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015085432014&view=2up&seq=356>.

Traditional partnership and femininity were also under fire due to the perceived nature of lesbian sexuality as lustful and greedy. *Don Juan Moderne* demonstrates female hypersexuality through explicit comparison with infamous fictional womanizer Don Juan. Not only is the center woman compared to him by name, she also visually has a harem of women at her disposal, marking both parties to be debauched. Nevertheless, although her sexual magnetism is highly visible, this image does reflect a fear of hidden lesbianism. “Don Juan’s” dress is a fairly exaggerated masculine look that suggests that lesbians can – or should – be able to be easily spotted. However, her gaggle of appropriately feminine-looking admirers emphasizes that even if women did not appear to be lesbians (i.e., masculine) they could still in fact be so, especially if brought under the influence of such a seductress as this well-tailored Don Juana.

While feminists were becoming a prominent topic in public discourse, lesbians were becoming prominent figures in the urban landscape. By the 1890s, lesbian cafés, *brasseries* (restaurants serving more alcohol than food), and other social spaces were cropping up in Montmartre.³⁷ Increased public visibility met with increased concern about, as well as voyeuristic interest in, this lesbian subculture, generating numerous artistic and literary works, including many satirical representations of lesbian café culture.³⁸ Albert Guillaume’s *Madame*

³⁷ Choquette, “Homosexuals in the City,” 158.

³⁸ Choquette, “Homosexuals in the City,” 159-60.

est au Cercle! (*Madame is at her Club!*), mocks these establishments as a bad imitation of men and their clubs, its title poking fun at how grand “madame” figures herself and her club to be (fig. 8). It also suggests that female social spaces were full of lesbians, expressing a fear of what happens when women socialize without male supervision. Men’s unstable place in a world of lesbians is demonstrated in a unique way here: the man (consequently, the only one pictured) in the background helping a woman with her coat could either be a concerned partner escorting her out of this undignified place, or a waiter taking her coat as she enters. The former would speak to the need for men to keep their women from these places, while the latter interpretation highlights the worry that men would become subservient to women, replaced by their masculine girlfriends.



Fig. 8, Albert Guillaume, *Madame est au Cercle!*, in *Gil Blas Illustré*, February 14, 1892, in *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-siecle France*, by Nicole G. Albert, Figure 3.6, New York: Harrington Park Press, 2016; <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015026115546&view=2up&seq=321>.

“Masculine girlfriends” could perhaps be a good alternative title for this image. The woman seated on the right—sporting a tuxedo-like top—looks suggestively at her fellow card player, smoking a cigarette (fig. 8). To the left, another smoking woman in a bowtie hovers around the much more feminine player, pointing to her cards. She could perhaps be the club owner or at least an older patron, evidenced by her less distinctly masculine (i.e., less modern) dress and hair one could picture as grey. Her instruction of the younger, immodestly dressed card player could be read as her giving directions of an entirely different nature, a clandestine nod to lesbian relations and the predation often attributed to them. Another butch-femme pair watches

the card game, the woman on the left clad in an especially masculine getup, from the hat and cigarette to the boxy vest and suggestion of trousers. More smoking women, and one dressed very clearly as a man, populate the background. This club is lesbianism on a small scale, giving viewers a window into a world—that they are ultimately meant to find unattractive—where women’s social and sexual relations would entirely revolve around other women, rather than men, disintegrating the gender-stratified, male dominated society that they knew and were supposed to cherish.

The Bourgeois Lesbian

The fears that lesbians would replace men and disrupt society were felt especially strongly among the upper class. Lesbian café culture and lesbian prostitutes, seen above, were already threatening to the bourgeoisie due to their connections to people of all classes—the rich as well as the poor could visit Montmartre’s brothels or *brasseries*, interacting with lesbians in cross-class, or even classless, spaces, encouraging such defiance of gender and class norms in the wider public.³⁹ Femme lesbians, depicted above with their butch girlfriends, defied gender norms in an especially threatening way—invisibly. Because they dressed in a traditional feminine style (hence the “femme” designator), they blended into the crowd as hidden lesbian figures amongst the heterosexual masses. This meant that not only could they trick other women into relationships with their unassuming appearance and steal them away from men, but also that any seemingly respectable upper-class woman could secretly be a lesbian. Lesbianism, instead of just being a part of lower-class corruption, was also part of upper-class degeneration, and it was doubly upsetting that bourgeois women could be so impure while masquerading as the most upright of citizens. The idea of lesbians infiltrating the upper class in this way and spreading immorality was frightening, and artworks reflected that fear. Marcel Châtelaine’s *Il Est Des Choses* explicitly illuminates the immoral threat that lesbianism posed to bourgeois society and the gender roles inherent to it. The title and captions read: “There are things...that the law tolerates...that virtue disapproves...that virtue bemoans” (fig. 9).⁴⁰ The law allows marrying for money over love, as evidenced by the bride holding the hand of her groom who is conveniently in possession of a sack labelled “100000.” Even visiting prostitutes—and perhaps committing adultery—is not so bad, as the man being embraced by a bare-shouldered woman while holding something marked “1000” is merely disapproved of. However, two women being together, especially publicly, is intolerable. Stepping outside of heterosexual norms and decentering men, lesbianism disrespects polite society itself.

³⁹ Choquette, “Homosexuals in the City,” 153-55.

⁴⁰ Albert, *Lesbian Decadence*, XV.

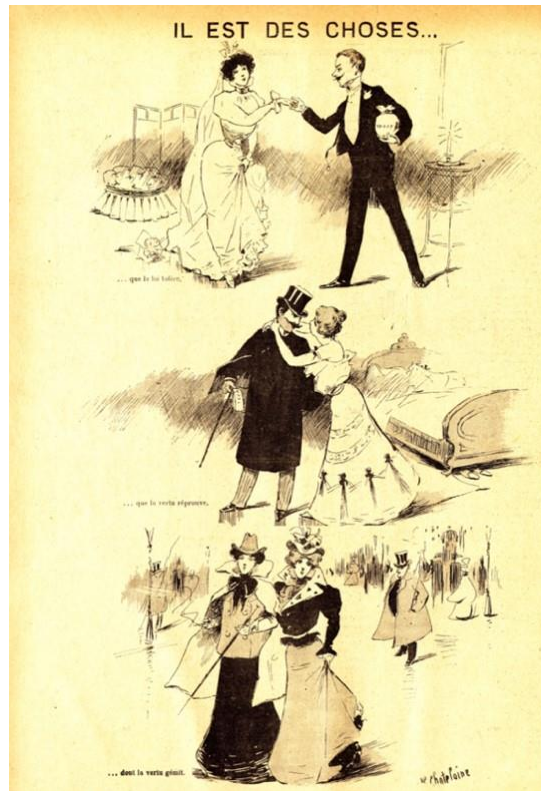


Fig. 9, Marcel Châtelaine, *Il Est Des Choses...*, in *Gil Blas Illustré*, January 27, 1899, in *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-siècle France*, by Nicole G. Albert, Figure P.1, New York: Harrington Park Press, 2016; <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015085432006&view=2up&seq=34>.

These fashionable women, strolling arm-in-arm, show how lesbianism is endangering the upper class (fig. 9). The woman on the left is dressed similarly to the star of *Don Juan Moderne*, with a masculine double-breasted jacket, large black necktie, and hat, while also sporting a cane and cigarette, persistent markers of both lesbianism and lesbian “maleness.” The woman on the right is her “femme,” allowing herself to be escorted down the street while delicately raising her skirt. The public nature of their homosexuality makes it particularly disgraceful. Although they are not pictured erotically, or even in a bedroom as in the scene above them, the idea that they could be seen in public, strolling past a gawking man while ignoring him completely, even perhaps defiantly, constitutes enough of a threat to sexual and gender norms, or “virtues.” The man watching them from afar—not to mention the man who created them—demonstrates how even in nonsexualized contexts, lesbianism was automatically demonized and viewed, especially by men, as a profane choice not fit for the public eye.

Other works, like Louis Anquetin’s *Le Rond-Point des Champs-Élysées*, chose to focus on the threat that lesbianism specifically posed to upper class women, presenting it as a dark shadow falling upon them (fig. 10). This image may look innocent enough, and to viewers unfamiliar

with lesbian symbolism, it likely was.⁴¹ However, in Léo Taxil's *La Corruption fin-de-siècle*, he states that "elegant lesbians" prowl around the Champs-Élysées in "search of a partner in vice," always accompanied by a poodle.⁴² This knowledge turns the formerly mysterious woman into a lurker, waiting for another woman—perhaps the one who is about to pull up in the carriage—to whisk off into the night. Anquetin's choice to portray lesbians in such a clandestine way serves a twofold purpose—to show lesbianism without getting censored for erotic content, and to communicate its dangers, rather than its potential delights.⁴³ However, this portrayal still reduces lesbians to their sexual activity. Although the woman is not pictured in an erotic manner, her entire interpretation hinges on the threat that is her sex life. It also calls back to the idea of lesbians—whether prostitutes, butch, or, as seen here, bourgeois ladies—stealing women away, possibly against their will. Forming a dialogue with Taxil's text, the picture casts lesbians as predators, covertly warning upper-class people, especially women, of the transgressive figures hiding among their ranks.



Fig. 10, Louis Anquetin, *Le Rond-Point des Champs-Élysées*, Pastel on paper, 1889, the Maurice Denis Museum, France, <https://www.musee-mauricedenis.fr/lescollections/galerie-des-oeuvres/article/rond-point-des-champs-elysees>

Toulouse-Lautrec's *Le Lit* and *Dans le Lit, le Baiser* are incredibly rare exceptions to artworks that villainized, eroticized, or otherwise stereotyped lesbians. These women are not wicked prostitutes or masculine man-haters threatening to ruin society, rather, they are shown comfortably tucked into bed, sharing a moment with one another (figs. 11 and 12). *Le Lit* is

⁴¹ Thomson, *The Troubled Republic*, chap. 1.

⁴² Léo Taxil, *La Corruption fin-de-siècle* (Paris: Georges Carré, 1894), 263, translated and quoted in Thomson, *The Troubled Republic*, chap. 1.

⁴³ Thomson, *The Troubled Republic*, chap. 1.

perhaps the tamest lesbian image of its time, with its two figures merely gazing sleepily at each other from across the pillows (fig. 11). Even its sister work, *Dans le Lit, le Baiser*, in which these women share a kiss, shows a moment of affection more than anything else, leaving the burden of sexualization on the viewer (fig. 12). While both scenes depict the women in bed, they are far from voyeuristic—the women’s nudity and possible sexual relationship is merely hinted at, not shown, and neither woman is engaging with the viewer—they are completely enwrapped in each other. It is clear why few artists followed this route—the shock, the sex appeal, even the threats of lesbianism are all gone, leaving viewers with rather mundane images that does not speak to their concerns, or even their sexual fantasies. These images would have likely still been considered offensive for merely depicting lesbians in any state, but do not seem to have been created with any other purpose beyond capturing a slice of life for these women, and the genuine relationship between them.



Fig. 11, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Le Lit*, Oil on cardboard, ca. 1892, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/resultat-collection.html?no_cache=1&zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bzoom%5D=0&tx_damzoom_pi1%5BxmlId%5D=000704&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bback%5D=en%2Fcollections%2Findex-of-works%2Fresultat-collection.html%3Fno_cache%3D1%26sz%3D9.



Fig. 12, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Dans le Lit, le Baiser*, 1892, Private collection, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/henri-de-toulouse-lautrec/in-bed-the-kiss-1892>.

Much like these paintings show an ordinary experience for these women, lesbians were an ordinary part of Toulouse-Lautrec's life. Outside of his aforementioned brothel stays, he frequented places like the lesbian brasserie La Souris and the Moulin Rouge, painting the queer women he met there, often in quite everyday scenes: sitting at a bar, dancing, at the theater.⁴⁴ Perhaps his social connections with lesbians made him represent them in more respectful ways – not necessarily even to encourage acceptance, but to purely portray what he witnessed, in contrast with artists who painted their greatest fears or fantasies. Toulouse-Lautrec proves that better lesbian representation was possible and that male artists did not universally demonize lesbians, but even the work of this prolific artist was not enough to challenge the dominant narrative.

Late nineteenth-century French society fostered the creation of certain lesbian figures, designed to reflect peoples' attitudes towards women and their sexuality. The hypersexual, prostitute, masculine, and bourgeois lesbian figure all demonstrated stereotypes, sexual fantasies, and societal fears about lesbianism. These representations were often grounded in lesbians' sexualization, morphing lesbianism into a show for the public and erasing the real experiences of these women in favor of male invention. Lesbians were rendered hypervisible through the reductive lens of the male artist, seen only as objects of desire, derision, or disgust. By applying a historical perspective, we can see how and why lesbians were portrayed in such ways, understanding the different facets of lesbian art as products of artistic, social, and scientific discourse. Lesbian representation is not a monolith, but it stems from intertwined contexts and functions as a part of a sexist, homophobic, and fetishistic cultural conversation on lesbians as a

⁴⁴ Choquette, "Homosexuals in the City," 160-1.

whole. Even today, queer women are still viewed and depicted in very similar ways as they are in these artworks—sinners, nymphomaniacs, too butch or too femme, threats, predators, or even objects for heterosexual male pleasure—and the current state of queer female representation as a legacy of nineteenth-century lesbian art warrants further research. As these artworks have shown, representation matters—whether accurate or not, it sends a message and contributes to narratives about real people and real experiences. Better representation for queer women is possible, but not until we understand and work to combat tropes that have only served to paint lesbians in the worst light.

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