Audio Tour Transcription

Degas, Impressionism, and the Paris Millinery Trade

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SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Introduction:

Hello my name is Simon Kelly. I'm curator of modern and contemporary art at the Saint Louis Art Museum and co-curator of the exhibition Degas, Impressionism and the Paris Millinery Trade. I would like to welcome you to the show.

This exhibition is a partnership with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. It has been many years in the making, dating back at least to 2010, and provides a fresh context for Edgar Degas' painting *The Milliners*, acquired by the Saint Louis Art Museum in 2007. This show is the first to examine Degas' interest in millinery as a subject. It explores Degas' beautiful images with the milliners who made hats, the shoppers who bought them, and of course the complex designs and materials of the hats themselves. The exhibition evokes the years from 1870 until 1914, a real golden age for millinery in Paris, and relates Degas' works to those of his Impressionist contemporaries as well as the famed milliners of the day.

This audio commentary features 14 stops, identified with audio icons in the galleries. Along the way you'll also hear from Abigail Yoder, research assistant on the exhibition, and Michael Macek, curator of birds at the Saint Louis Zoo.

We hope that you enjoy the audio tour and your visit to the exhibition.

Stop 1: Edgar Degas, *The Millinery Shop*, 1879-1886

Simon Kelly:

In this beautiful painting, the largest Degas ever produced on a millinery theme, he shows a smartly dressed woman intently examining an apricot felt hat. He does not provide precise clues to her identity, that enigma is part of the work's interest, but in all likelihood she is a milliner at work on this hat that remains in an unfinished state. Degas even suggests that she is holding a hatpin between her lips.

In this exhibition for the first time, we're bringing together this painting with a preliminary pastel study, here hung alongside. The study is fascinating as it shows that the woman was originally dressed in a very different, more decorative blue ensemble, with a blue *fichu* or neck scarf and wide-brimmed hat.

In the study, she is a shop girl trying on her hat. But as Degas evolved his painting composition, he removed her hat and scarf, changing her dress into a more businesslike outfit, and in so doing, shifting her identity from consumer to maker or milliner.

Although Degas' extended studies of the composition do focus on the figure, the painting itself is dominated by the hats that are placed in the foreground of the composition. Degas shows a range of spring hats in a variety of colors and designs. At the center is a large straw hat trimmed with artificial flowers, chrysanthemums and white lilacs, with long green streamers. Just to the left and beneath that is another hat at an angle with the trim of a red ostrich plume that is barely visible. To the left and bottom center, are colorful silk taffeta hats, pale peach and ice blue, both with ribbon-bows. Degas is highlighting here the range of fashionable hat styles in 1880's Paris, as well as his fascination in finding painted equivalents to hat materials whether straw, ribbons, plumes, or the sheen of silk.

Stop 2: Jean Béraud, *Paris, rue du Havre*, 1882

Simon Kelly:

Jean Béraud was born in Saint Petersburg in Russia before moving to France where he began to enjoy commercial success in the 1870s with his finely detailed evocations of Parisian modern life and fashion. Here he shows a busy crossroads in the north of Paris with the rue du Havre on the left leading back to the distant porticos of the Gare Saint-Lazare train station. Most noticeably on the right, he shows a Printemps department store covered with scaffolding and advertising hoardings following its destruction by a massive fire in 1881. Printemps having first opened in 1865 was one of the first department stores to transform the contemporary shopping experience in the 19th century. It would later reopen in the 1880s and it remains to this day.

Béraud animates his scene with numerous details of passers-by, most notably, the woman in the foreground in black dress carrying two hat boxes. Her identity is unclear, she could be a shopper who has just bought hats or she could also be a *trottin* or errand girl, a very familiar figure on the streets of Paris. *Trottins* were teenage girls who worked in millinery shops delivering hats to customers around Paris. They occupy the lowest rung on the hierarchy of occupations in the millinery shop, but could also work their way up to become trimmers or even designers in their own right.

Stop 3: Édouard Manet, *At the Milliner's*, 1881

Simon Kelly:

Édouard Manet was a debonair dresser who was fascinated by the complexity of Parisian fashion. Particularly in his later work he liked to paint women wearing the latest hat designs, and he also visited milliners, especially the shop of the well-known Madame Virot on the rue de la Paix. He talked about how her hats enthralled him as well as the splendor of her designs.

The scene here may have taken place in Virot's shop and shows a woman trying on hats, probably standing in front of a mirror, which is outside the picture frame to the left. Manet creates a flat, compacted space by placing his sitter against a background of dense floral wallpaper.

She has just picked up a dark green hat. The empty turned wood hat stand is just visible behind and a faint smile plays across her face. Will she choose this hat design or perhaps a straw hat with red streamers at back left?

Beyond its subject, the painting is also very noticeable for its~~his~~ technique. Manet finely outlines a silhouetted profile of the woman while elsewhere his painting is full of lively, vibrant brush work. For example, in the slashing, zigzagging, black brush marks at bottom right used to represent the base of her shawl. This work was Manet's only true millinery subject. It remained in his studio at his death and may have been left unfinished.

Stop 4: Edgar Degas, *Woman Trying on a Hat*, c.1884

Simon Kelly:

Degas was always fascinated by unusual perspectives in his compositions and rather than representing his sitter frontally as would have been the case in a more conventional composition, he chose to show her here from behind and also slightly from above. Her back forms an elegant, almost swan-like curve that is offset by the triangle formed by her arms. Her red hair also suggests that she could have been based on the copper-haired Mary Cassatt, who often served as a model for Degas.

This is one of Degas five paintings on a millinery theme and it is the least well known. It's a fascinating work not only for its unusual composition, but also for its rich color. Degas is often thought of as a master of drawing and line, but he is also a great colorist. And here he explores complimentary colors in a very successful way, contrasting the intense red of the carpet, with the green of the mirror, and the yellow-orange of the woman's skirt, with her dark-blue bodice.

In this exhibition, we are showing this painting in America for the first time. We are also re-uniting the picture with the related full-scale pastel study. In the pastel we can see Degas exploring different possibilities for the woman's pose and even see the outlines of the lower position of her body. Degas has attached a second sheet of paper. The join is still visible, enabling him to raise her arms and head.

Stop 5: Maison Virot, *Woman's Hat*, 1889-1905

Abigail Yoder:

This is a woman's hat from around 1900 by Maison Virot. Madame Virot opened her first millinery shop in 1860. During the course of her career she gained renown for her extraordinary talent and opulent designs. Her hats attracted the attention of the aristocracy including Empress Eugenie, the wife of Napoleon III, who became one of her loyal clients. In the early 1880s, her shop was frequented by the impressionist painter Édouard Manet who was said to be enthralled by her hat designs. Manet even used Virot's hats in his paintings.

Madame Virot retired in 1885 but her firm continued on as Maison Virot and continued to produce hats until the first World War. This hat from around 1900, showcases the elegant styles of headwear associated with Maison Virot. This straw hat is embellished with silk ferns and leaves and dramatic pink silk roses. These lifelike flowers are testament not only to the beauty of Virot's designs but also to the skill of artificial flower makers in Paris during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The flower making industry went hand in hand with the millinery trade. Flower makers, called *fleuristes,* were responsible for the cutting, dyeing, and designing a range of flower types from tiny, realistic looking violet blossoms, to massive blue roses made from silk, velvet, and even paper. Milliners would purchase huge amounts of these flowers directly from the *fleuristes* to be used in their hat designs. Like the millinery trade, the artificial flower industry offered employment opportunities for girls and young women.

At the time this hat was made there were nearly 800 *fleuristes* shops in Paris alone, and by 1910 it was estimated that 25,000 women worked in the artificial flower industry. It was a skilled trade that required long apprenticeships before girls would be allowed to make flowers on their own. This emphasis on training and the development of the workers' skills helped the French flower industry rise to unprecedented heights in the nineteenth century, when French flowers came to be known as the finest in the world.

Stop 6: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Young Girl with a Hat*, c.1890

Abigail Yoder:

By the 1890s hats were becoming broad and flat and were often covered with elaborate trimmings of flowers, feathers, and ribbons. This held true for girls' hats as well as for women's. In fact girls' hat styles can be so large and decorative they could virtually overwhelm the wearer. Straw hats with vibrant ribbon-bows like the hat seen here in Renoir's *Young Girl with a Hat* were frequently illustrated in fashion magazines like *La Mode Illustree* and *Le Caprice* in the 1890s.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century Renoir regularly depicted images of young girls in big hats, like the painting here and other works on view in this exhibition. He was fascinated with hats throughout his career. In 1879, he offered to illustrate millinery shops and women's hats for his friend George Charpentier's journal *La Vie Moderne*.

He was also known to have visited the atelier of Madame Esther Meyer, a well-known milliner whose shop was located on the rue Royale, not far from the Paris Opera and the rue de la Paix. During one such visit, Renoir even requested that should create a hat based on one of his pastel drawings, indicating his esteem for the milliner.

In addition to designing a hat for Esther Meyer to make and keeping hats in the studio as props, Renoir also even constructed his own hats on occasion. In her memoirs, Julie Manet recalled a time when Renoir showed her a portrait of a model in a white muslin hat that he had made himself.

Stop 7: Edgar Degas, *Portrait of Zacharian*, c.1885

Simon Kelly:

Bowler hats were invented in London in 1849 and quickly became the uniform of the lower and middle classes, offering a cheaper and more practical alternative to the top hat. They were generally made of the durable material of wool felt that was able to withstand a range of weather conditions. As the century progressed, the bowler hat also took on more non-conventional artistic associations and was often worn by painters and writers.

In this pastel, Degas shows his friend, the Armenian still life painter Zacharie Zacharian, wearing a bowler hat with finely upturned brim. Zacharian was born in Istanbul before moving to France where he enjoyed some official success, with a number of his works being bought by the French state.

He was known for his dandy-ish persona and here his bowler crowns his ensemble of silver-tipped Molucca cane, and finely manicured beard and moustache. He holds the remains of a cigarette, smoke from which swirls to the right of his head.

Degas and Zacharian shared an interest in fashion, and in his later life, Degas would increasingly favor a bowler hat as he took prolonged walks through the streets of Paris.

Stop 8: **Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec, *M. Delaporte at the Jardin de Paris*, c. 1893**

Simon Kelly:

Top hats became the hats of choice of the wealthy and upper classes during the nineteenth century in Paris. In part, this was because their very rigidity impaired the physical activity that was associated with manual labor and the lower classes. Their height also lent a sense of self-confidence to the wearer, with the crown of the hat sometimes as high as 8 inches.

Initially, top hats were made of beaver fur, but by the 1850s, that material was increasingly replaced by gleaming silk plush that was far easier to procure. Toulouse-Lautrec shows a sophisticated advertising executive, Monsieur Delaporte, wearing a silk plush hat with dark suit and silver tipped cane.

In this night-time scene, Delaporte sits in a fashionable Parisian café, *Le Jardin de Paris*, with a busy crowd visible behind in the lamplight. The woman in mauve coat with red hair and ostrich plume hat is probably the famed can-can dancer Jane Avril, a favorite model for Toulouse-Lautrec.

Toulouse-Lautrec's composition was originally more vertical with a closer focus on Monsieur Delaporte, before he added a strip of cardboard to the left, enabling the inclusion of two more fashionable women in the background.

Stop 9: Caroline Reboux, *Boater*, 1900

Simon Kelly:

The straw boater was originally worn specifically for boating and yachting, but by the 1880s and 1890s it achieved more widespread popularity and was worn more generally in everyday life, often appearing on Paris's city streets. At first, it was favored by men, but increasingly was worn by women and came to be seen as a symbol of the independent modern woman.

This hat would probably have been worn by such a woman. It was designed by the prominent milliner Caroline Reboux, who is herself known for her strength of personality. It is trimmed with elegant red and black piping as well as red ribbon. Plaits of straw have been sewn together to form the hat shape with its wide brim and flat crown. There were a wide variety of types of straw that were imported to Paris, often coming from England and Italy, two countries that were particularly well known for their quality of straw.

Stop 10: **Mary Cassatt, *Head of Simone in a Green Bonnet with Wavy Brim (No. 2)*, c.1904;**

Abigail Yoder:

This is Mary Cassatt's *Head of Simone in a Green Bonnet with Wavy Brim (No. 2),* from circa 1904. This little girl is identified as Simone, a young resident of the village Le Mesnil-Théribus, located to the north of Paris where Cassatt lived in the early 1900s. During this time Cassatt frequently painted portraits of the children in the village. Images of Simone, as well as other young girls, wearing a variety of enormous hats made up a considerable portion of Cassatt's artistic output between 1900 and 1905.

This pastel illustrates Simone in a large blue-green bonnet with a swooping brim forming a wave-like pattern over her face. The sketchy strokes of the pastel on the crown seem to suggest a bushy ostrich plume or a spray of feathers. This type of large bonnet was a popular style for young girls during the early years of the 20th century. Contemporary illustrations and photographs from fashion journals like *Les Modes* show girls wearing similar styles.

As the title indicates, this pastel is the second in a series of three images Cassatt made of Simone wearing this hat. The other images show slight variations in finish and pose. But all three clearly represent the same girl in the same hat. Cassatt often repeated the same hat in her works, suggesting that she kept hats as studio props.

Cassatt herself was interested in hat fashions over the course of her artistic career as well as in her personal life. She was an avid shopper and is believed to have allowed Edgar Degas to accompany her to hat shops and dress fittings. For Cassatt, a hat was an essential accessory, as it was an expression of her identity as well as a signifier of her social standing.

Stop 11: Caroline Reboux, French, Woman's Hat, c.1900

Simon Kelly:

Caroline Reboux was one of the leading milliners in late nineteenth-century Paris, acquiring the nickname the "Queen of Milliners". She was known for her independent, innovative hat designs and employed as many as 100 people in her shops, including her flagship store on the rue de la Paix.

Reboux had a specialty in plumed hats, and the hat here shows Lady Amherst pheasant feathers. We're very fortunate to have here from the Saint Louis Zoo, Mike Macek, who's the curator of birds. He is going to talk to us a little bit more generally about the importance of plumage in hats at this time.

Michael Macek:

This species is the Lady Amherst pheasant, and at this time in history the late 1800s to early 1900s, taxidermy was an emerging art and specimens, both mounted in curios as well as feathers mounted on hats, were very popular. We think of birds and we appreciate birds, I think, mostly for their plumage and their beautiful colors, so, they were sought after in this particular trade. Local feathers, I'm assuming, were much more reasonable in price and available, but exotic feathers were also very much sought after. Many plumes came from the Americas, mostly wading birds from swamp areas, so things like egrets and herons and ibis and spoonbills.

This time in history in the United States was also a time in which conservation was just emerging. Organizations such as the Boone and Crockett Society, which was developed by Theodore Roosevelt, and then later, the first of the Audubon societies, were created in the United States. These different societies within the U.S. spread, and the Audubon Society became a very powerful force for conservation endeavors for specifically birds and wetlands.

Stop 12: **Jeanne Lanvin, French, *Woman's Hat*, c.1915**

Simon Kelly:

Jeanne Lanvin's couture house is one of the most well-known fashion brands today and began from humble beginnings in the 1880s when a young Jeanne established a millinery shop in Paris. Her attention to detail and understated elegance in her millinery remain the foundation for her subsequent expansion into women's couture.

This riding hat was probably worn by a so-called "Amazon," a horsewoman who was celebrated for her independence of spirit. The ostrich plumes here forming an elegant trim.

We're fortunate to have here Michael Macek, curator of birds, from the St Louis Zoo, who is going to speak a little bit more about the role of women in bird conservation.

Michael Macek:

At this time in history, around 1915, the *Migratory Bird Act* in the United States had already been enacted. This basically eliminated the taking, killing, or capture of any live or endangered migratory birds, basically recognizing that none of the species, which cover about 800 American species, could be crossed over international borders, including into Europe.

Interestingly, the women that actually wore these hats that were adorned by these beautiful birds, were the ones that were, in fact, responsible for the conservation of them and the wetlands and ultimately the passage of the *Migratory Bird Act*. There were two women in Boston by the name of Harriet Hemingway and Mina Hall, who were socialites. They implored their socialite friends, over tea parties, to not wear these hats because of the effect it was having on American populations of birds. This went on to become the very first Audubon Society in the United States.

Stop 13: Guillard Soeurs, French, *Woman's Hat*, c. 1910

Simon Kelly:

By the early 1900s, hats could be up to two feet wide, effectively forming broad platters that were decorated with a wide range of trimmings. These enormous hats complemented the more narrow dress silhouettes that came into fashion in the early part of the twentieth-century. This white straw hat by the Guillard Sisters is characteristic of this new type of hat and shows large white ostrich plumes curving over with a trademark elegant droop.

We're happy to have Michael Macek, curator of birds from the Saint Louis Zoo, here to speak more about ostrich plumage and the popular fascination at this time with exotic birds

Michael Macek:

With the decreased availability of exotic birds, birds such as the ostrich, in this case, you see a large white ostrich plume, became very popular. Ostriches are found throughout Africa both the Sahara and sub-Saharan regions, but they were also domesticated, so they became much more available, at least in the domestic market.

At this time, in general, there was great fascination with exotic birds. In 1904 for example, in Saint Louis, during the Louisiana Purchase World's Fair, the Smithsonian Institute built the 1904 World's Fair flight cage. At that time, it was filled with exotic birds from all over the world. In 2004, the Saint Louis zoo renovated the structure and brought new life for the centennial of this cage.

Ironically, instead of placing exotic birds in this cage, we placed the very birds for which many of these feather specimens are found in the hats: native egrets, herons, ibis, and roseate spoonbills; all native species that are covered by the *Migratory Bird Act*.

Stop 14: Edgar Degas, *The Milliners*, c.1898

Simon Kelly:

This impressive painting highlights the rich and warm palettes characteristic of Degas' late work. The red of the dress of the working milliner on the left, the orange of her chair, the red-brown of her assistant's ensemble, and the copper hair of both women all merge together to create a symphony of color.

By this time, Degas was also exploring the possibilities of abstraction. He represents the forms of the women as flat masses of color outlined against the back wall that provides little spatial recession. The Saint Louis Art Museum x-rayed the painting and we found that Degas originally gave a frilly detail to the white apron of the milliner holding the hat. He subsequently painted this over, creating a more generalized color mass, further indicating his interest in abstraction.

It is perhaps no coincidence, a picture such as this, held a deep appeal for the great modern painter Henri Matisse, an important collector of Degas' work. Beyond its formal qualities, Degas' painting is a testament to the artistry of the millinery profession in Paris at the turn of the 20th century, highlighting as it the does, the careful focus of the milliner as she works to attach ostrich plumes to the crown of a wide-brimmed straw hat.

Milliners was acquired by the Saint Louis Art Museum in 2007 for the very substantial sum of $10,000,000, the largest purchase in the Museum's history. It is Degas' last oil painting on the theme of millinery and its significance is further indicated by the fact that Degas produced several related studies, including drawings in charcoal and a full-scale pastel.

Milliners was painted during the heyday of the Parisian millinery industry. But with the passing of conservation laws and changes in fashion after World War I to much simpler hats, notably the cloche, the millinery industry went into decline. Millinery remains a marginal presence in Paris today with only 41 milliners listed in the Parisian yellow pages. This painting, however, harks back to a time when milliners and their creations were an integral part of everyday Parisian life.