THE MODELS’ MORALITY:
A STUDY OF SEURAT’S LES POSEUSES

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ABSTRACT

Completed in 1888 Georges Seurat’s monumental canvas, *Les Poseuses,* depicts three models in various states of undress within the artist’s studio. Given the relative seclusion of this work until the Barnes Foundation’s landmark move to Philadelphia in May of 2012, *Les Poseuses* has not received the same amount of critical attention as his other canvases of combat. Despite the fact that artists in the nineteenth century regularly used professional models, their profession and, by extension, their very being had become significantly stigmatized in Parisian society. Over time prejudices developed and resulted in the unwarranted ostracizing of these working-class women from general Parisian society. This thesis will attempt to prove Seurat was not only keenly aware of the reputation of models, but that in *Les Poseuses* he actively sought to recognize these preconceptions through a consideration of the influence of Orientalism and fashion and the implications of the inclusion of *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte* in the background in his depiction of three working-class women.
DEDICATION

To my parents, James and Marie Jeanette Nowlin—
the best a girl could ask for.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>LES POSEUSES</em> AS A MODERNIZATION OF THE OTHER</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. MODELS À LA MODE: A CONSIDERATION OF FASHION IN <em>LES POSEUSES</em></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ON THE LEFT: A CONSIDERATION OF LA <em>GRANDE JATTE</em> IN <em>LES POSEUSES</em></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. AFTERWARD</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURES</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Georges Seurat, <em>Une Baignade, Asnières</em>, 1884, oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London, United Kingdom</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Carle Vanloo (Charles André van Loo), <em>Sultan’s Wife Drinking Coffee</em>, 1755, oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Eugène Delacroix, <em>Odalisque Reclining on Divan</em>, 1825, oil on canvas, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, United Kingdom</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. J.E. Dantan, <em>The Model’s Lunch</em>, 1881 (medium and location not listed)</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Georges Seurat, *Copy after Ingres’s Stratonice*, circa 1876, pencil, Private Collection

16. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Antiochus and Stratonice*, 1840, oil on canvas, Musée Condé de Chantilly, Chantilly, France

17. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Valpinçon Bather*, 1806, oil on canvas, Louvre Museum, Paris, France

18. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Source*, 1820-1856, oil on canvas, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France


20. Eugène Delacroix, *The Sultan of Morocco and His Entourage*, 1845, oil on canvas, Musée des Augustins, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Toulouse, Toulouse, France

21. Eugène Delacroix, *Jewish Wedding in Morocco*, circa 1839, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France

22. Eugène Delacroix, *Women of Algiers*, 1834, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France

23. Georges Seurat, *Poseuse de dos*, late 1886, oil on wood, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France

24. Georges Seurat, *Young Woman Powdering Herself (with multi-spectral scanning enhancement in upper left-hand corner)*, 1890, oil on canvas, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, United Kingdom

25. Georges Seurat, *Young Woman Powdering Herself*, 1890, oil on canvas, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, United Kingdom

26. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France
27. Édouard Manet, *In the Conservatory*, 1878, oil on canvas, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany


31. Image from *La Vie Parisienne* taken from *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (No date or artist listed)

32. Édouard Manet, *Nana*, 1877, oil on canvas, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

33. Édouard Manet, *Woman Fastening Her Garter*, 1878-1879, pastel on canvas, Ordrupgaard Art Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark

34. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with Slave*, 1842, oil on canvas, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland

35. Fashion Print from *La Monde Elégant*, June 1866 found in “Early Impressionism and the Fashion Print” (No artist listed)

36. Claude Monet, *Women in the Garden*, circa 1866, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France

37. Paul Renouard, *Couple Looking at Ingres’s ‘La Source’*, 1880, from *Les Pensionnaires du Louvre*, Private Collection
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE WOMEN OF LES POSEUSES

In 1879 Georges Seurat left the École des Beaux-Arts after only eighteen months of instruction. A year later he began his career as a professional artist.¹ As one of the youngest artists to exhibit at the eighth and final Impressionist Exhibition in 1886 (it was here that he debuted his legendary *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte*), Seurat in essence inherited the artistic tradition of these avant-garde painters.²

The show, however, marked a schism of sorts among the Impressionists. Shortly before the show, Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir expressed displeasure over the fact that Camille Pissarro was planning to exhibit pointillist works with a Parisian dealer. As tensions mounted among the group, it came to pass that Monet, the veteran of Impressionism whose work *Impression, Sunrise* (Fig. 1) gave rise to the name of the movement, and a few others would not exhibit at the 1886 show.³ There was a divide between those Pissarro called the “old Impressionists” and those Paul Signac referred to as the “Néo.”⁴ Naturally, due to his age and progressive technique that moved away from that of the old Impressionist

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³ Renoir, Gustave Caillebotte, and Alfred Sisley also did not participate in the exhibition. (See Cachin, 172.)
masters, Seurat fell in with those who came to be known as Neo-Impressionists. His desire to establish a new school dovetailed nicely with the Neo-Impressionists’ aims to move away from the “arbitrary and empirical” and allowed him to reach beyond the limits of his formal training and experiment with emerging techniques and theories.

Though Seurat’s career was relatively short compared to others of the period, he endeavored to create both a new style and manner of thinking about art within the canvases that he produced. In a letter written to Maurice Beaubourg in 1890, Seurat claimed that he committed himself to, “four large canvases of combat,” which he valued above all others. These four works are Une Baignade, Asnières (Fig. 2), La Grande Jatte (Fig. 3), Les Poseuses (Fig. 4), and either Parade de Cirque (Fig. 5) or Chahut (Fig. 6). All four works depict scenes of modern life, but it is Les Poseuses, the third of these canvases, which will serve as the primary subject of this study.

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5 Interestingly, Seurat was extremely young even among this new group. He was six years younger than Vincent van Gogh, eleven years younger than Paul Gauguin, and a substantial twenty years younger than Paul Cézanne. (See Goldwater, 116.)
6 Seurat once quoted Eugène Delacroix saying, “One cannot create a school without providing many great works as models.” (See Seurat in Perspective, 14.) Herbert says in Seurat: Drawings and Paintings says, “By copying this passage from Delacroix, Seurat made clear his ambition to form a school (and he was indeed productive; although he died aged thirty-one, he left behind about 240 painting and several hundred drawings.” (See Herbert, 7.) Signac used the terms “arbitrary and empirical”. (See Thomson, 129.)
7 Thomson, Seurat, 222. Seurat died prematurely on March 29, 1891 at the age of 32.
Seurat began work on *Les Poseuses* in the late 1886 or early 1887 when, after seeing *La Grande Jatte* at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition, even critics and friends who generally championed his work, questioned whether pointillism was capable of depicting the classic subject matter of the female nude.\(^{10}\) When *Les Poseuses*, which portrays three models in various states of undress within the artist’s studio, debuted at the Indépendants in 1888 it received maddeningly mixed reviews. While his friends felt that the work was a masterpiece for the new generation, some referred to Seurat’s models as “rachitic” and disease-ridden.\(^{11}\) Following this, the work travelled around Europe for several years, appearing in a number of exhibitions and was purchased and held by several collectors before it finally found a permanent home at the Barnes Foundation in 1926.\(^{12}\)

Given the relative seclusion of this work until the Barnes Foundation’s landmark move to Philadelphia in May of 2012, *Les Poseuses* has not received the same amount of critical attention as his other toiles *de combat*.\(^{13}\) Only a handful of studies exist. The most prominent among them being Linda Nochlin’s article “Body Politics: Seurat’s *Poseuses*,” Françoise Cachin’s

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\(^{10}\) Paul Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 111.

\(^{11}\) Cachin, “*Poseuses, 1886-1888,*” 279.

Pierre Bonnard referred to *Les Poseuses* as “magnificent.” (See Leighton & Thomson, 150.)

\(^{12}\) Cachin, “*Poseuses, 1886-1888,*” 279.


Considerations of this work, whether in the above mentioned studies or in more general studies of Seurat’s work, seem to comment most frequently on its “revolutionary” nature in that it serves as a frank representation of professional models and, by extension, working-class women. In her article, “Body Politics: Seurat’s Poseuses,” Nochlin suggests that the work was a progressive and rather innocuous image of the average working woman, saying they were “unseductive.” Other interpretations of Les Poseuses appear to concur with this reading.

While this interpretation of the painting is by no means unfounded, it tends to ignore the social status and public perception of models during Seurat’s lifetime. Despite the fact that artists regularly used professional models at the time, their profession and, by extension, their very being had

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14 Other scholars have devoted minimal time to the work, but those mentioned above are the only pieces of scholarship solely devoted to the study of Les Poseuses. Some examples of these less focused studies would be Marie Lather’s Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model and Paul Smith’s Seurat and the Avant-Garde.

15 Many may assume that the female figure in Gustave Courbet’s The Painter’s Studio (1855) is an earlier representation of the professional model at work, but as Marie Lathers points out in Bodies at Work: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model the subtitle of the painting is “A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life.” (See Lathers, 8) This suggests that the woman may simply be an allegory of beauty or merely a symbolic representation of the women that Courbet regularly portrayed throughout his career.


17 Cachin even pointed to this several years earlier claiming that they, “calmly presented themselves simply as models.” (See Cachin, 279.)
become significantly stigmatized in Parisian society.\textsuperscript{18} It was a widely held belief that posing nude before an artist, who was very often married, was an inherent advertisement of sexual availability and that the profession as a whole led to complete moral deterioration.\textsuperscript{19} Race also played a role in popular culture’s perception of these women as, more often than not, they were also immigrants or identified as different from the typical French individual due to their ethnicity and/or skin color. These prejudices naturally resulted in the unwarranted ostracizing of these working-class women from general Parisian society. They were viewed as being distinctively different from the average or, perhaps more appropriately, the acceptable contemporary individual. I postulate that Seurat was not only keenly aware of the reputation of models, but that in \textit{Les Poseuses} he actively sought to recognize these preconceptions through its depiction of three working-class women.

In order to support this claim, this thesis will be comprised of three chapters that each consider a different facet of \textit{Les Poseuses} and its creation. Chapter One will consider the influence of the Orientalist art movement that preceded Seurat’s career by a generation. Regardless of the artist’s chronological separation from the movement, its stylistic markers and overall sentiment greatly affected Seurat’s work. While a student at the École des Beaux-Arts, he was trained by a former pupil of the renowned Orientalist painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and became very interested in the

\textsuperscript{18} Marie Lathers, \textit{Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 3.
\textsuperscript{19} Lathers, \textit{Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model}, 26-27.
work of Eugène Delacroix. This chapter will consider Les Poseuses as a modernization of the Other, taking into account Seurat’s familiarity with Orientalist works and his knowledge of the social and racial status of models, and the work of more contemporaneous artists such as Édouard Manet, which serve as a comparison to the women in Les Poseuses.

Chapter Two will take a closer look at fashion items within Les Poseuses. Though the women in Les Poseuses are nude, they are surrounded by countless trappings of nineteenth-century consumer culture in the form of various fashion items. Each woman is clearly in possession of a hat, gloves, a parasol, shoes, a fan, and stockings. What do these fashion items say about these three working women? At the time, accessories like the ones seen in Les Poseuses were coded with specific social meaning and had the power to intimate information regarding the identity and/or personality of the wearer. Additionally, the chapter will investigate the implication of the visual connection between Seurat’s painting and fashion plates.

Finally, Chapter Three will explore the implications of the presence of Seurat’s earlier masterpiece, La Grande Jatte, within Les Poseuses. Other than solidifying the setting of the work within the artist’s studio, why is La Grande Jatte present? Popular perception of La Grande Jatte suggests that the painting represents the middle class in a state of leisure, while scholarship has suggested a number of explanations for La Grande Jatte’s presence within the later painting. This chapter will first explore multiple

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20 Rewald, Seurat, 17 & 20.
theories put forward over the years to explain the artist’s reason for inserting his 1884-1886 canvas into *Les Poseuses* and will then consider the nineteenth-century perception of the location of the Île de la Grande Jatte, the work itself, and its interaction with Seurat’s other canvases of *combat* in an effort to suggest that the women of *Les Poseuses* and those shown within *La Grande Jatte* are of the same social status.

To conduct this research I will use a variety of methodologies. As the social and economic place of models in nineteenth century France will be discussed, I will consider *Les Poseuses* through both a Marxist and Feminist lens. Additionally, as I will explore the presence of the Other in *Les Poseuses*, I will use Orientalist and Colonialist methods of study. Above all, I am interested in considering the overall social implications of *Les Poseuses* and plan to achieve this through a combination of the methodologies mentioned above throughout the body of the following thesis.

Through this study I hope to determine the value of *Les Poseuses* as a work of art within Seurat’s oeuvre and to come to a better understanding of who these women were. They represent a large population of immigrants and French citizens who were of the working class and marginalized as a result of their profession. I intend to demonstrate that Seurat was distinctly aware of their place and, in creating this monumental work, sought to draw attention to their social and economic plight.
CHAPTER 2

LES POSEUSES AS A MODERNIZATION OF THE OTHER

In the course of a terse verbal altercation with one of her husband’s models, the wife of the British artist Charles Lucy is known to have said the following regarding models,

I’m sure I can’t think however a woman could be so nasty indelicant [sic] as to take off all her things before a man; it is a filthy disgusting thing to do and I can’t think how they can get any woman to do [it].

Even though it was generally understood that many women turned to the profession of modeling as a result of financial desperation—models were often able to make significantly more per day than women in other professions—the position expressed by Mrs. Charles Lucy represents the most common perception of the working-class women who found pay as models in nineteenth-century Europe.

Frances Borzello acknowledges this distaste for models in her book, *The Artist’s Model*, saying that, “...while the painting of the nude was respected, the unclothed lady who modeled for it was not,” proving that, at the very least, models held a paradoxical identity within

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22 Susan S. Waller, *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 44 & 63. Waller notes that models could earn an average of five francs per day. Other women were likely to only make between sixty centimes and three francs a day, while men generally made between three and five francs a day. Some highly skilled corsetières had the potential to make between one and five francs a day—a high rate for women.
society. As a result, a series of stereotypes regarding the personal attributes and race of models became prevalent in the late 1800s, leading to the blatant discrimination against them in both society and popular culture and even provoked a certain amount of violence towards these women.

The generation that preceded Seurat’s—the period to which Ingres and Delacroix both belonged—was also concerned with the study of a body of people who were equally stereotyped and ostracized. This subset was not models or the working class, but, rather, people of the East. Many artists of the early nineteenth century were consumed with the act of representing what was referred to as the “Other,” an obsession that manifested itself in the development of Orientalism. Seeking to “bring the Orient home” these painters attempted to capture the intricacies and perceived oddities, including women, of Eastern culture in the same way that Seurat sought to represent working-class models. In many ways women of the Orient were allotted the same stereotypical attributes of sexual availability, moral

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24 Waller, *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870*, 45-46. The artist, Émile Bernard, recounted seeing a 15-year-old model attacked and rolled in what he believed to be excrement in 1885. As a result of such violence, the École des Beaux-Arts restricted the use of female models in 1883 to one week a month and began to demand that instructors remain in the studio at all times so as to ensure the safety of these women. Although, given that the account by Émile Bernard two years later, not even this could guarantee security. This viciousness was the manner in which models could often expect to be treated at the time *Les Poseuses* was painted. (See Lathers, 45.)
deviancy, and indefinable prurience as models. Given the perception of models in the 1880s, it appears that Seurat, who was greatly affected by the work of Orientalists, was seeking to acknowledge a correlation between the women of *Les Poseuses* and the Other as portrayed in Orientalist works. This chapter will discuss the manifestation of these parallels within *Les Poseuses* through the consideration of the earlier movement and the perception of late nineteenth-century models at the hands of a highly prejudicial public imagination.

Western culture had long been aware of Near Eastern people as evidenced by earlier works such as Gentile Bellini’s *Seated Scribe* (Fig. 7) dating to the late fifteenth century and Carle Vanloo’s famous portrait of Madame du Pompadour as the Sultan’s wife entitled *Sultan’s Wife Drinking Coffee* (Fig. 8). The movement, officially referred to as Orientalism, however, developed in the early decades of the nineteenth century and took a more calculated interest in the representation of the Other. While Orientalist paintings had the potential to report facts and political themes, a majority of works, such as *Grande Odalisque* (Fig. 9) and *Odalisque Reclining on a Divan* (Fig. 10), were preoccupied with illustrating the “other-ness” of their...

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27 This is exemplified through the similarities of character traits ascribed to both models and Oriental figures. Take for example Mackenzie’s statement that there were established “archetypes” in the Orientalist art that marked the Other as cruel, lazy, and lustful among other things. (See MacKenzie, 46.) Numerous sources mentioned throughout this thesis also point to the fact that models were accused of having a number of the same personality traits, the most significant being promiscuity.

28 The term “public imagination” is used by Waller in *The Invention of the Model* to discuss the construction of the identity of models. (See Waller, 49.)
subjects through an emphasis on sexuality.\(^{29}\) As John MacKenzie explains in *Orientalism: History, theory and the arts*, the Oriental Other was identified through a series of archetypes including laziness, a lack in technical advancement, cultural decadence, and, most importantly, lust.\(^{30}\) Above all, however, the Orientalist movement allowed artists to explore representations of power. This included the assertion of cultural supremacy, political power over “lesser” races, and control over the female form.\(^{31}\)

In addition to the more social elements of Orientalism, the movement was also defined by a number of formal qualities. In her article, “The Imaginary Orient,” Linda Nochlin claims that one of the most significant features of Orientalist paintings is the absence of the Western man.\(^{32}\) She observes that although the presence of the Western onlooker is always assumed in images of the Other, they are never actually seen within the picture plane.\(^{33}\) Rather, the viewer is to understand that in looking at the canvas, they have in essence taken the stance of the supposed Westerner. The one who looks at the reclining nude or snake charmer in this way is then marked as superior compared to those depicted. The Westerner/Other

\(^{29}\) Denny, “Quotations in and Out of Context: Ottoman Turkish Art and European Orientalist Painting,” 219.


\(^{31}\) Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” 123. In her article, Nochlin claims that Orientalism was not so much about the domination of the Western man over the Near East, but more about the Frenchman’s power over women.

\(^{32}\) Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” 122.

\(^{33}\) Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” 122.
relationship can be seen to have been artificially established within the Salon.

This configuration is the first and, perhaps, most significant parallel between Orientalist works and Seurat’s *Les Poseuses*. Works of the later nineteenth century depicting models that were concomitant with *Les Poseuses* often include a representation of the artist who is symbolic of the Western man. In images such as these, the model is vulnerable and susceptible not only to the male gaze, but touch as well. Consider Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Artist and His Model* (Fig. 11) of 1890-1893. Although the painting post-dates *Les Poseuses*, it serves as a valuable example of the most prevalent late nineteenth-century depictions of models within the artists’ studio. Other lesser-known works, such as the sketches *The Model’s Lunch* (Fig. 12) by J.E. Danton and *Studio Scene* (Fig. 13) by Henri Fantin-Latour, demonstrate the ubiquity of studio scenes portraying the artist with their model/muse. The assumed male viewer is also present in images of objectified women that are not identified as models as can be seen in Édouard Manet’s *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (Fig. 14). In this painting, the viewer is confronted with the image of an attractive young woman while the reflection of a well-dressed man can be seen in the mirror on the right side of the image. *Les Poseuses* differs from these contemporaneous images in that the “Western man” remains absent. In doing this, Seurat has segregated his women from
many contemporary representations of models and instead created a visual
equivalent reminiscent of earlier depictions of the Other.

In addition to these initial similarities between *Les Poseuses* and the
Orientalist style, there is also ample documentary and visual evidence to
suggest that the works of this movement—specifically those of Ingres and
Delacroix—had a profound effect on Seurat’s work. Encouraged by his mother
and uncle to pursue his interest in art, he enrolled in a local municipal
drawing school at the age of fifteen and it is here that the first sign of his
interest in Orientalism can be observed in his sketch (Fig. 15) based on one of
Ingres’ preliminary studies for *Antiochus and Stratonice* (Fig. 16). When he
advanced to the École des Beaux-Arts in February of 1878, Seurat was then
placed in the studio of Henri Lehmann, a former pupil of Ingres. It could be
said that in the brief period of time he spent there he immersed himself in
learning about and studying the Orientalist tradition. As is to be expected,
under the tutelage of a teacher trained by Ingres, Seurat spent a substantial

34 Thomson, *Seurat*, 14. Though the subject of this work seems to suggest that it
should be considered as a history painting rather than an Orientalist work, the story
tends to lend itself quite strongly to the sentiment surrounding nineteenth-century
representations and understanding of the Other. In the tale, Antiochus falls ill and
is believed to be dying, but when the doctor arrives, he concludes that the young
man is suffering from nothing more than physical attraction for his father’s new
wife, Stratonice. In an effort to save his son, Antiochus’ father offers the young
woman to his son. This story displays the belief exhibited in Orientalism that the
feminine body was an object to be possessed. Additionally, as both Ingres’ studies
and final canvas were completed between the mid-1830s and 1840, the artist was
already well known for his Orientalist works whose style can be seen in this canvas.
(See http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.13)

35 Thomson, *Seurat*, 16.
amount of time considering the works of the old master.\textsuperscript{36} Robert L. Herbert comments in \textit{Seurat: Drawings and Paintings} that Ingres’ styles “informed [Seurat’s] mature style by encouraging him to idealize the human form.”\textsuperscript{37}

A number of scholars have even suggested that Ingres’ impact on Seurat can be seen in \textit{Les Poseuses}. Herbert claims that the seated model on the left-hand side of the canvas quotes the master’s \textit{Valpinçon Bather} (Fig. 17) of 1808.\textsuperscript{38} The similarities here cannot be denied. As the painting was acquired by the Louvre Museum in 1879, Seurat would have been well aware of this work, given his frequent visits to the galleries.\textsuperscript{39} Like the earlier image, Seurat’s seated nude keeps her back to the viewer and sits on the end of a divan or bench. Cachin also mentions that Seurat’s contemporary, Jules Christophe, compared the central figure of \textit{Les Poseuses} to \textit{La Source} (Fig. 18).\textsuperscript{40} This comparison seems to be a little more of a stretch. Seurat’s nude stands in a contrapposto-like position with her hands held gracefully in front of her rather than overhead as Ingres’ figure does. This critique, however, does make clear that Seurat’s contemporaries were considering him in relation to the older Orientalist painter.

While the visual parallelism between these works is compelling, is it possible that there is a more convincing comparison to be made between the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Robert L. Herbert, \textit{Seurat: Drawings and Paintings} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 57.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Herbert, \textit{Seurat: Drawings and Paintings}, 57.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Herbert, \textit{Seurat: Drawings and Paintings}, 141.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Cachin, \textit{Poseuses, 1886-1888}, 283.
\end{itemize}
work of Ingres and Seurat’s *Les Poseuses*? In revisiting poses that he used in both *La Source* and *Valpinçon Bather*, Ingres completed his *The Turkish Bath* (Fig. 19) in 1862. Within this tondo the viewer can locate a lyre player whose pose is a near copy of the earlier *Valpinçon Bather* and even a front-facing nude remarkably similar to that of *La Source*, but there are also a number of other figures in profile similar to the model on the right. The resemblance between this painting and *Les Poseuses* resides not in a one-to-one exact replication of poses, however, but in the overall impression that the work gives. *The Turkish Bath* is historically remembered to be an accurate representation of Near Eastern women in their “natural habitat” based on the reminiscences of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.\(^{41}\) The women were thought to be at peace in what was perceived to be a safe place, free of the sexualized male gaze.

The women of *Les Poseuses* are similarly described by Marie Lathers in *Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist's Model* as women who, “do not pose but repose during a break from their work.”\(^{42}\) While Lathers

\(^{41}\) Frederick Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13. Despite this, Walter Denny suggests that the artist used an alternative source or merely let his desire to create a stereotypically eroticized work overtake him as he points out the discrepancies between Montagu’s description and Ingres painting. The work clearly depicts these women in a state of wantonness. They pose suggestively and even partake in acts of lesbianism. Montagu, as Denny points out, described the antithesis of this writing that, “there was not the least wanton smile or immodest Gesture amongst ‘em.” (See Denny, 228.)

\(^{42}\) Lathers, *Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model*, 9. Emphasis was the author’s. Scholars have made several other, perhaps more plausible, explanations for the scene in Seurat’s painting, but Lathers' suggestion addresses the question of models’ comfort within the studio. More probable
suggests that the image is one of women in a state of relaxation, the viewer cannot help but revisit the prejudices implied through statements like those of Mrs. Charles Lucy—“...to take off all her things before a man; it is a filthy disgusting thing to do.” In fact, in an interview published at the turn of the twentieth century, a model by the name of Theresa, who had posed for artists the likes of William Bouguereau, recounted the actual experience of this state of repose that Lathers describes. Marie Laparice, the article’s author, quotes Theresa as having said,

while it doesn’t disturb us to pose, we are uncomfortable remaining nude before the students as soon as they are no longer working...as soon as we climb down, we become women again, and our first gesture is an instinctive gesture of shame.

Theresa and countless women like her clearly felt exposed to the male gaze in these moments of inactivity and it is instances such as these, exactly like the one depicted within Les Poseuses, which highlight the cultural hierarchy that models were subjected to and the similarities it bore to early nineteenth-century understandings of the Near Eastern Other.

explanations include that the three women were essentially auditioning to actually be hired by the artist. Thomson says, “The women are not actually posing for a picture; one waits, another displays herself, the third dresses. They are showing themselves to the artist, hoping to be hired to pose.” (See Thomson, 146) Nochlin argues that the women are, nothing but models posing as off-duty models.” (See Nochlin, 219) Thomson also points to the fact that others have, incorrectly according to him, suggested that Les Poseuses was actually an image of one woman in three different poses. (See Thomson, 146.) Finally, as I believe, the models are merely in the process of undressing in order to pose.

43 Postle and Vaughn, The Artist’s Model: From Etty to Spencer, 56.
The impact that Delacroix, who was one of the most prolific Orientalist painter of the early nineteenth century and Ingres’ bitter rival, had on Seurat is different from the influence of Ingres, but no less significant to the development of his work. The exact point at which Seurat became aware of Delacroix’s work is not known, but it likely occurred while he was still a student at the École des Beaux-Arts. It is certain that the younger artist had read and annotated the writings of Delacroix by the age of twenty-two—five years before he began work on *Les Poseuses*.

Seurat was especially interested in Delacroix’s use of color. Few documents written by Seurat survive today, but of the handful that do, a number speak to the artist’s interest in Delacroix. While this interest represents a compelling element of Seurat’s artistic development, for the purpose of this discussion it is more important to consider what works he was studying rather than the reasons for which he was drawn to them. In notes made on May 6, 1881 Seurat compares the brushwork of *Sultan of Morocco and his Entourage* (Fig. 20) to that of *Jewish Wedding in Morocco* (Fig. 21). This comparison is significant in that it not only indicates Seurat’s continued interest in Orientalism, but also verifies that he was studying Delacroix’s

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46 Herbert, *Seurat: Drawings and Paintings*, 7. Herbert says that Seurat had finished annotating the writings of Eugène Delacroix by the time he was twenty-two. This was in 1881; some two years after leaving school and still five years before he first exhibited *La Grande Jatte* and started work on *Les Poseuses*.

paintings at the Louvre. This implies that while Seurat did not leave behind any written evidence of it, he was likely familiar with Women of Algiers (Fig. 22), which had been in the Louvre’s collection since it was acquired after the Salon of 1834.

His awareness of this work is noteworthy because it is perhaps the work that bears the greatest resemblance to Seurat’s Les Poseuses. Like Seurat’s own atelier, the harem was an extremely private space. These apartments that contained the wives and mistresses of the wealthy Near Eastern man were a space that outsiders were not often permitted to enter. Delacroix, however, was uncharacteristically allowed to enter a harem when on a diplomatic journey to North Africa. Although Women of Algiers differed from other Orientalist works like the Turkish Bath in that the women were


50 Personal accounts by the artist’s acquaintances suggest that while meeting in his studio was not altogether out of the question, it was far more common to meet elsewhere. Émile Verhaeren recounted one meeting in the artist’s studio. Other meetings he discussed were held outside of Seurat’s studio. Gustave Kahn once said that Seurat’s studio was, “small, narrow, and uncomfortable... cold in the winter and torrid in the summer.” In the obituary he wrote for Seurat, Kahn also describes the studio in great detail, as though many in the art community were not familiar with it. Furthermore, the artist also used the studio as his private residence, suggesting that visitors may have been more few and far between than those at other studios due to its dual functionality. (See Kahn, 22.)

clothed, it still bore the trappings and stereotypes of the harem. With this in mind, it seems that both Delacroix and Seurat have conflated the feeling of a studio scene with the Western man’s fantasy of the Near Eastern harem.

Les Poseuses reveals a compositional similarity to the earlier work in a number of ways. Most obviously, both images include three women in a state of inactivity. The models appear to be in the process of disrobing in preparation for their session, while their counterparts lounge amid lavish fabrics and comfortable pillows. Like the seated nude on the right, Delacroix’s right-hand figure is also shown in profile. Additionally, the central nude mimics the Algerian woman on the left. This assumed Other looks beyond the picture plane to make eye contact with the viewer. Seurat’s model interestingly does the same. Each even tilts her head to the side in a similar manner so as to suggest that she has acknowledged the presence of the absent voyeur and are considering them with nonchalant interest.

The space that Seurat portrayed, though visually contrasting, even psychologically mimics the Orientalist space in addition to establishing a dichotomy of interior and exterior. In the earlier canvas there is a set of doors and a strong ray of light emanating from an unseen window that serve as signifiers of the public space beyond the harem that the women are not allowed to experience. The left-hand side of Les Poseuses is dominated by

52 Ma, “The Real and Imaginary Harem: Assessing Delacroix’s Women of Algiers as an Imperialist Apparatus,” 16-18. The term “stereotypes” refers to the point that Ma makes in that many women in North Africa worked outside the home to supplement the household income. (See Ma, 15.)
Seurat’s *La Grande Jatte*, which depicts a well-known Parisian park. The women in each of these scenes are contained within an interior space; signs of an exterior world are visible, but not accessible.

The paintings are psychologically linked through the external act of viewing. In his book, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, Paul Smith comments on the role of the viewer in relation to *Les Poseuses* saying, “....the painting becomes coherent only when the (real) spectator takes up the physical and psychological standpoint of the artist who is unseen within the scene depicted, but who is present as its observer.”53 The same could be said of *Women of Algiers*. The implied viewer of the scene that Delacroix created would be the husband and/or keeper of the women depicted, as few others were generally permitted within the harem. In order for the painting to be fully comprehensible, the viewer must accept his or her role as the objectifying male voyeur who stands just beyond the picture plane. This act of the viewer inhabiting the role of the artist and/or male voyeur emphasizes the point made by Nochlin that artists like Delacroix, and later Seurat, “had more or less unlimited access to the bodies of the women who worked for them as models,” in their studio.54 This was not necessarily physical access, but, rather, a sense of possession in which the women were contained within a confined space at the artist’s will.

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53 Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 111.
Beyond the more overt parallels between *Les Poseuses* and the Oriental Other, there is ample evidence to suggest that the place of professional models economically, socially, and racially created a veritable modern Other late nineteenth-century Paris. This tension, of course, originates with the artist/model relationship that is the point from which all stereotypes regarding the model derived. By the nineteenth century, artists seem to have adopted the notion that the model was not merely a sitter, but a muse who bestowed inspiration on the artist.\(^55\) As the women in Orientalist paintings were viewed more as objects to be possessed rather than intellectual beings, we see this construction take hold in popular stories surrounding the artist and model. Evidently, in order to bolster his confidence and to help him understand the theory of color better, the artist Thomas Couture advised a student to find a model with whom he could have sex.\(^56\) Models were seen as sexual objects; the use of which had an expected sexual and, sometimes, artistic outcome.

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\(^{55}\) Postle and Vaughan, *The Artist’s Model: From Etty to Spencer*, 55. The fact that artists and models were often secluded in the studio alone for hours and days at a time caused stereotypes and jealousy to develop. The wife of Charles Lucy was suspected of having been so disturbed by her husband being locked in his studio with a model that she spied on them from the skylight. (See Postle and Vaughan, 57.) Nochlin also points to this accepted artist/model relationship in the opening of “Body Politics.” (See Nochlin, 217.)

\(^{56}\) Waller, *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870*, 37. Théophile Gautier wrote a story in 1845 entitled “Feuilles d’album d’un jeune artiste,” which acknowledged a popular cliché of the time that said artists were able to understand and master the use of color more thoroughly by engaging in intercourse with models.
While Susan Waller claims that it was not a given that artists engaged in sexual relationships with their models, it seems that more often than not this turned out to be the case. Delacroix’s journal, for instance, provided a detailed chronicle of the artist’s life and in it he often spoke of his personal relationships with women—specifically models. On October 22, 1822 he commented on one encounter with a model saying, “Last Tuesday morning, [October] 15, a little baggage named Marie—nineteen years old—came to pose. I took a big chance of a disease with her.” The daily account of his life repeats this scenario in much the same way. In one instance, in the entry for March 31, 1824, he even used crude Italian slang to say that he “screwed” a young model named Emilie. Given the extent to which Seurat studied the artist’s writings, he undoubtedly came across language such as this many times. Models, in Delacroix’s opinion, were considered nothing more than sexual objects. This easily played into accepted stereotypes of models in Seurat’s age and likely made an impression on the artist as we know he had read Delacroix’s journal by the age of twenty-two.

Further consideration of his personal life indicates that Seurat was no exception to this assumptive artist/model relationship. Having met the model Madeleine Knoblock (sometimes Knobloch) in 1885, he quickly entered into a

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Susan Waller explains the meaning of Delacroix’s statement, “Due chiavature... ossia una prima, poi una,” made with reference to the model, Emilie.
relationship with her that lasted until his death in 1891.\textsuperscript{60} In a number of works it appears that Seurat used Knoblock as a model, leaving behind visual evidence of his stereotypical behavior—a sexual/romantic relationship between artist and model.\textsuperscript{61} It can be seen, however, that Seurat seems to have harbored some anxiety regarding being associated with Knoblock. Up until just days before his death, it appears that no one even knew of Seurat’s relationship with Knoblock or the fact that they had a child together.\textsuperscript{62} Furthermore, it seems as though Seurat went out of his way to either hide Knoblock’s identity when he used her as a model or to make sure that he himself was not associated with her. For instance, it has been suggested that she actually posed for the left-hand figure of \textit{Les Poseuses} (Fig. 23), but her face is completely obscured.\textsuperscript{63} This poses the question of whether the individual was derived from Ingres’ \textit{Valpinçon Bather} as previously suggested or if the artist was merely seeking to conceal the identity of his lover by choosing her to pose for the only figure whose face the viewer cannot

\textsuperscript{60} Jill Berk Jiminez, ed., \textit{Dictionary of the Artist’s Model} (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), 300. Herbert notes that Knoblock was a professional artists’ model. (See Herbert, 335.) Although Delacroix’s journals were not published in full until 1893-1895, parts of the journals were published during Seurat’s lifetime. Théodore Silvestre published different portions in \textit{L’Illustration, Histoire des artistes vivants, Eugène Delacroix, documents nouveaux} in 1853, 1856, and after Delacroix’s death in 1863 respectively. Furthermore, Achille Piron published a collection of Delacroix’s writings in \textit{Eugène Delacroix, sa vie et ses œuvres} in 1868. (See O’Brien, 1.) Seurat would have certainly had access to these publications.

\textsuperscript{61} Jiminez, \textit{Dictionary of the Artist’s Model}, 301-302.


\textsuperscript{63} Cachin, “\textit{Poseuses}, 1886-1888,” 286.
see. Additionally, a recent discovery by scholars at the Courtauld Institute has indicated that Seurat had originally included a self-portrait (Fig. 24) in his painting *Young Woman Powdering Herself* (Fig. 25), which is widely accepted to be a portrait of Knoblock, but later removed it before it was publically exhibited. Seurat’s desire to be publicly distanced from his connection to a model suggests that he was aware of the social stigma that accompanied the identity of a model.

Seurat’s acceptance of the public perception of models as a modern Other is also exhibited in the title that he chose for *Les Poseuses*. At its current residence of the Barnes Foundation and in many scholarly sources, the canvas’ title has been translated to *Models*. Interestingly, however, this name is not actually an exact translation of the title chosen by the artist, as the French term for “models” is actually “modèles.” Cachin and Waller have both commented on the actual meaning of the term “poseuses” and through a consideration of this, the viewer may surmise that the artist is once again acknowledging the negative connotation of the nineteenth-century model.

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64 Although one does not necessarily preclude the other.
66 Knoblock seems to have embodied the stereotype of model. Following Seurat’s death, when her identity became known, she was often referred to as “the impossible woman” by a number of the artist’s friends and died in 1903 of cirrhosis of the liver. (See Jimenez, 300-301.)
The primary translation of *poseur* refers to one who lays hardwood flooring.\(^69\) This is clever, for in choosing this term Seurat has recognized the working-class nature of the models.\(^70\) The secondary definition of *poseur* is more revealing, as after 1840 it was accepted slang used to mean one who assumes an affected manner.\(^71\) Additionally, this term was used as slang to refer to the affected nature of women who spent time in concert halls, which were often considered a breeding ground for deplorable acts.\(^72\) Therefore, the artist’s choice to use “*poseuses*” over “*modèles*” immediately becomes vitally important to the viewer’s understanding of these women.

The nationality of models in nineteenth-century France also played a major role in the social status of these women. It is important to also consider the demographics of the occupation as the 1800s saw a significant increase in France’s ethnic diversity. As a major cultural center, the country attracted numerous immigrants. Naturally, this increase in the immigrant population of Paris affected the modeling profession and practices within the city. Lathers explains in *Bodies of Art* that the racial prevalence of models can be divided into three distinct categories—Jews, Italians, and Parisians.\(^73\) As will be seen, however, they were not as clearly defined as she suggests, but these

\(^{69}\) Cachin, “*Poseuses, 1886-1888,*” 273.

\(^{70}\) Though the term suggests manual/construction labor, Seurat likely felt that the wordplay would be understood.

\(^{71}\) Cachin, “*Poseuses, 1886-1888,*” 273. Waller, *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870*, 51. Cachin explains the meaning of the term and Waller notes that it was used as a slang term.


eras do create a more concise discourse of the ethnic diversity seen in modeling during the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{74} The acknowledgment of this heterogeneity is significant in that it indicates yet another manner in which models were categorized as the Other at this point in time.

One of the most prevalent and controversial minorities within the modeling profession was the Jewish model that was essentially ubiquitous in the early decades of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{75} Jews had long been discriminated against as a people in French society and were only granted full citizenship on September 25, 1791.\textsuperscript{76} Though the Jewess was greatly admired for her ideal beauty, it cannot go without notice that her popularity and subsequent demise was shrouded in both vague and overt anti-Semitism.

The French theorist, Ernest Renan, claimed that Semitic people were not distinguishable from other Western Europeans in terms of skin color and that identifying them was only achieved through the consideration of their negative attributes such as their lack of a philosophy, visual arts, and mythology that were “Jewish” in nature.\textsuperscript{77} Regardless of the obvious inaccuracy of statements such as these, a stereotypical view of the Jewish

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} Lathers, \textit{Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model}, 24. According to Lathers, 1825 to 1848 saw the ubiquity of Jewish models, Italian models dominated 1852 to 1870, and the Parisienne model characterized the final phase, lasting from 1870 to World War I.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Lathers, \textit{Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model}, 24.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Waller, \textit{The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870}, 81.
\end{itemize}
individual and, more specifically, the Jewish model developed in nineteenth-century France. Semites were believed to be superior to other minorities such as Africans, Asians, and Native Americans, but an Other nonetheless.\textsuperscript{78} Despite the assumed negative personality traits of these women, such as a domineering nature, the Jewess was believed to be in some way genetically predisposed to the modeling profession as a result of her beauty.\textsuperscript{79}

Though earlier in the century the Jewish model was considered a virtuous figure, public perception shifted midcentury to coincide with the more general suspicion that tended to surround Jews in the French consciousness. The publication of \textit{Manette Salomon} by the Goncourt brothers had dealt a crushing blow to the reputation of Jewish models.\textsuperscript{80} The story portrayed a young Manette whose “Jewishness” corrupts the pure artist, Coriolis, who was unaware of her ethnicity.\textsuperscript{81} As a result of \textit{Manette Salomon}’s immense popularity, the Jewish model was vilified in French society and in many cases was suspected of clandestine prostitution.\textsuperscript{82} Seurat

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\item \textsuperscript{78} Todorov, \textit{On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought}, 99. MacKenzie, \textit{Orientalism: History, theory and the arts}, 53. Todorov comments on the nationalities that Semites were considered to be above, while MacKenzie discusses the fact that they were considered only slightly more respectable than other Oriental figures.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Lathers, \textit{Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model}, 30.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Waller, \textit{The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870}, 87. Waller mentions the assumption of prostitution.
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was a great admirer of the Goncourts’ novels and it is very likely that he was familiar with the brothers’ most famous publication.\textsuperscript{83}

It is important to understand the perception of Jews as a modern Other in nineteenth-century France as the central figure in \textit{Les Poseuses} has often been identified as a \textit{modèle juive}. Gustave Kahn, who was a friend of the artist and an owner of the painting after his death, was a Jew himself became quite taken with the central model in \textit{Les Poseuses}. Her frontality means that she is the only one of Seurat’s three figures whose ethnicity can be addressed in any real capacity. When \textit{Les Poseuses} was first exhibited in 1888, Kahn wrote that woman possessed a, “tête Juive,” meaning Jewish head, “beneath a coiffure of black hair.”\textsuperscript{84}

Seurat’s knowledge of Jewish stereotypes has already been established through his interest in the Goncourt brothers, but he likely became familiar with the believed “typical” appearance of Jewish women during his study of earlier Orientalist works. As mentioned previously, Seurat had seen Delacroix’s \textit{Jewish Wedding in Morocco} at the Louvre by 1881.\textsuperscript{85} In this painting, the dancing woman has dark hair and a shapely form similar to that of Seurat’s central figure. Even more closely related to Seurat, however, is that of Henri Lehmann’s, Seurat’s teacher at the École des Beaux-Arts,


\textsuperscript{84} Nochlin, “Body Politics: Seurat’s \textit{Poseuses},” 224.

\textsuperscript{85} Herbert, “Appendix N: Eugène Delacroix,” 398.
Daughters of Jephtha exhibited at the Salon of 1836. A review of the painting in L’Artiste said Lehmann had captured the large eyes, red lips, aquiline nose, and elongated face of “the ideal of Hebrew beauty.” Though it is not known if Seurat saw this painting in person, he would have undoubtedly been aware of his instructor’s work and the commonly accepted physical description of the Jewish woman.

As the Jewish model fell from favor in the midcentury (though she did not disappear entirely), an influx of Italian immigrants arrived in France. By 1851 there were approximately 8,500 Italians living in Paris and by 1876 there were over 11,500. Believed by the French to be “whiter” than most other immigrants, Italians were seen as a racial midpoint of sorts between the Oriental connotation of the Jewess and the ethnically supreme white, Western European (ex. French or English). Regardless of this, Italians were considered Other in nature and were shrouded in similar, somewhat more ridiculous, stereotypes to that of the Jewish model.

Italians were also thought to be genetically predisposed to modeling, but in a vastly different manner than the Jewish model. French writers and

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87 Ockman, *Ingres’s Erotic Bodies: retracing the Serpentine Line*, 75.
artists claimed that these individuals had been imbued with a deeper appreciation of the arts due to the development of the Renaissance tradition in their homeland.  

The ridiculousness of this blatant stereotypical assumption, which is wholly unrealistic as the Renaissance had occurred nearly three hundred years earlier, is matched only by the claims that Italians were constitutionally lazy and, thus, ideal for long days spent posing in the atelier or that the warm climate of Italy made them uninhibited with regards to posing nude. These generalizing conventions, which rely heavily on the already developed negative nineteenth-century opinion of models, were integral in peripheralizing Italian models in French society.

Favor shifted once again in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In order to coincide with Nationalist leanings toward the end of the century, the Parisian woman became deeply prized in the French artistic tradition. Generally referred to interchangeably as a Parisian model and the Parisienne, a term which marked her modernity and fashionable nature, this model differed from her predecessors in that she was of the same ethnicity as her assumed French viewer—meaning white, urban, and Catholic—but the

91 Lathers, Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model, 33.
color of her skin continued to play a key role in her popularity and identity.\textsuperscript{94} The pale skin of this model was valued as a sign of her urbanity, which was directly applicable to the concept of modernity that artists like Seurat were looking to illustrate in the 1880s.\textsuperscript{95}

However, despite her prevalence in art of the late nineteenth century, the Parisienne was not considered a respectable member of French society. This type likely hailed from the working class and though she postured herself as the moralistic grisette, she was actually, according to Lathers, “defined by her insincerity and, often, vulgarity.”\textsuperscript{96} This opinion was likely spurred by earlier representations of the Parisienne as prostitutes in works like Manet’s \textit{Olympia} (Fig. 26)

The negative and somewhat sexually deviant qualities of the Parisienne are also used in attempts to identify the women of \textit{Les Poseuses}. The late nineteenth century writer, Paul Dollfus, claimed,

The Parisienne model is more coquettish, possesses more the science of undressing: she lets her skirts and dresses fall down

\textsuperscript{94} Lathers, “Changing Tastes: Ethnicity and the Artist’s Model,” 18. Lathers uses the term “Parisienne” as being interchangeable with “Parisian model.” In \textit{Bodies of Art} she describes the Parisienne as having a reputation that was shrouded in assumptions of vulgarity. (See Lathers, 39.) This is a term she consistently uses to identify the Parisian model. It was also a term fraught with duality. In the catalogue for \textit{Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity} Françoise Tétart-Vittu points to an alternative reading of the word saying, “....Parisiennes were fashionable, chic, and beautiful women who moved freely in the artistic circles of Paris.” (See Tétart-Vittu, 78-80.) Lathers acknowledges the duality of the Parisienne in her article “The Social Construction and Deconstruction of the Female Model in 19th-century France” saying, “This model constituted one version of the Parisienne, a catchall term for the modern woman, described by Octave Uzanne in 1894 as "multiforme"....” (See Lathers, 8.)

\textsuperscript{95} Lathers, “The Social Construction and Deconstruction of the Female Model,” 8.

\textsuperscript{96} Lathers, \textit{Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model}, 39.
around her, and the shirt itself slips along her shoulders, then her body, revealing one by one her charms, in the order generally adopted by a modesty that still resists— feebly.97

Thomson suggests that this seductive method of disrobing can be seen in the left and central figures of Les Poseuses saying that when the final item of clothing falls to the ground it creates a pedestal of sorts.98 By identifying her manner of undressing as a means of displaying the body, attention is drawn once again to the Parisienne's association with deviancy—a common stereotype of the Other.

Nochlin claims in her article, “Body Politics: Seurat's Poseuses,” that there is, “no titillating incident, no prurience, no hint of delicious victimization,” within Seurat's painting, but is this true? Through a comparison to the works of the Oriental Other and a consideration of the social and racial status of models in nineteenth-century France, it is evident that the models of were both sexualized and discriminated against in Parisian society. Seurat has acknowledged their “other-ness” in his representation of three working-class women in Les Poseuses.

97 Lathers, Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model, 56. Thomson makes the same point about the manner in which the Parisienne removed her clothes, but he also mentions that Italian model removed their clothing over their head rather than letting it fall to the floor. (See Thomson, 146.)
98 Thomson, Seurat, 146.
CHAPTER 3

MODELS À LA MODE: A CONSIDERATION OF FASHION IN LES POSEUSES

When Charles Baudelaire first published *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* (*The Painter of Modern Life*) in 1863, his words served as a rallying call for a generation of artists who were dissatisfied with the state of and restrictions made by academic painting. The writer and poet encouraged artists to approach their art with a more modern outlook. A major component of this “modernity” that Baudelaire discussed was fashion. According to him, a woman’s construction of beauty was inextricably related to the tokens of consumerism she adorned herself with—her attire was an invaluable part of her identity.\(^{99}\)

As the exhibition *Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity*, exemplified, many artists of the mid-to-late-nineteenth century subscribed to Baudelaire’s claims regarding the importance of accurately depicting modernity in this way. Though “fashion” may not be the first term readily associated with Seurat’s work, there is ample evidence within his oeuvre to suggest that he was deeply concerned with modernity and, by extension, the role of fashion in both nineteenth-century society and art. One painting in which this interest is most evident is *Les Poseuses*.

In her book, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing*, Diana Crane states, “The character of a woman’s wardrobe was influenced considerably by the types of accessories she was able to use. A stylish appearance was the result of adding items...each of which expressed varying degrees of stylishness.” 100 Though the women depicted in *Les Poseuses* are nude, numerous fashion accessories including hats, shoes, gloves, stockings, parasols, and a fan surround them. 101 The presence of these items demonstrates both Seurat’s interest in fashion and his perception of the social identity and even the ethnicity of the models.

First, consider the fan, which sits in the foreground, directly behind the model on the left side of the painting. This item was traditionally meant to provide women with some sense of privacy when in public. 102 When necessary, this small item could even block the owner from the intrusive male gaze. In this sense, fans were protective items used in an effort to preserve one’s respectability. Susan Hiner highlights this notion in her book *Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth Century France* when she points to Henry Vesseron’s poem, “Sur un éventail,” which reads:

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101 These women’s interest in fashion does not preclude them from being referred to as an Other as their ethnicity was identified by society through a consideration of stereotypical physical features. Also, belief in their promiscuity was only bolstered by the meaning of these fashion items.
One day, the Graces demanded from Vulcan
A lightweight shield, made for their weak hand
And that could protect their youth and charms
At once against Love, his daring and his weapons
From his black arsenals visiting the gear
The god discovered nothing that would do
When Venus, laughing, to the three defenseless sisters
Instead of a shield gave her fan.\textsuperscript{103}

This is particularly relevant to \textit{Les Poseuses}, as the three women have historically been compared to the classical group.\textsuperscript{104} It suggests a fan is a means of preserving chastity, leaving the viewer to wonder what is implied by the fact that none of the models in \textit{Les Poseuses} maintain a hold on this “shield.” Its disuse emphasizes that these women are susceptible to the unrestrained gaze of the viewer, at once referencing the fact that these women are paid to be seen in this most vulnerable of states and, therefore, subjected to the dangers of male attention.

On another note, the poem associates the fan with Venus, goddess of love, giving it a sexualized connotation.\textsuperscript{105} Hiner mentions that the fan was understood in contemporary literature, specifically in works like \textit{Madame Bovary}, to aid in the orchestration of promiscuous acts.\textsuperscript{106} A number of newspaper articles and other publications written between the 1870s and

\textsuperscript{103} Hiner, \textit{Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth Century France}, 148-149.
\textsuperscript{104} Cachin, “Poseuses,” 275-276. Cachin suggests that Seurat was inspired by Raphael’s \textit{Three Graces}, which had recently been purchased by the duc d’Aumale. This purchase was well known in the Parisian art world.
\textsuperscript{105} Hiner, \textit{Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth Century France}, 148-149.
\textsuperscript{106} Hiner, \textit{Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth Century France}, 145-146.
1890s also suggest that there was even a “secret” language associated with the fan. Nearly all of the signals conveyed in these publications indicate some form of adulterous or, at the very least, morally questionable messages to be shared between lovers. For instance, an article in *Bow Bells: A Magazine of General Literature for Family Reading* published on April 20, 1876, informs the reader that by touching the right eye with a closed fan one was asking, “When may I see you?” Other messages that could evidently be relayed through the language of fans, as indicated in this article, were equally suggestive. What, then, does it mean that at least one of the models possesses this tool of seduction? Is it possible she is as morally defunct as her critics in society portray her to be?

Unlike the presence of a single fan, many other accessories can be seen in multiples within *Les Poseuses* indicating that more than one of the women possessed them. This is the case with the parasol. Also referred to as the ombrelle, three are present in *Les Poseuses*—the handle of the first can be seen to the left of the dog in *La Grande Jatte*, the second directly behind the model on the left, and the third between the central figure and the model on the right of the canvas.

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The parasol was an extremely popular fashion item in the late nineteenth century and many newspaper publications gave readers specific instructions as to how to choose the proper one in newly opened department stores and informed them as to what was considered the pinnacle of style at the moment. An article published in Bow Bells in September of 1889 instructed women by saying, “The getting [of] a parasol means the arranging of one’s mobile background for the summer and a mistake will result in one’s complexion looking sallow, one’s hair losing its gloss, and one’s general appearance being anything but desirable,” and encouraged the female shopper to choose the classic parasol that will never go out of style over the trendy one, which will inevitably lose its appeal after a short time due to quickly changing trends.

Hiner claims that the ombrelle was generally associated with upper-class Parisians who spent their days in a state of leisure and that working-class women, like those in Les Poseuses, would not have used one. This, however, is generally known to be untrue, as scholars such as Thorstein Veblen have consistently suggested since the nineteenth century that each social class strove to achieve the lifestyle of those in the stratum above

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111 “Buying a Parasol,” Bow Bells: A Magazine of General Literature for Family Reading, September 13, 1889, 250.
them.\textsuperscript{114} Inherently, this would include the purchase and use of fashion
items. Proving this, a nineteenth-century writer commented that, “There is
not a lady or working class girl who does not have an umbrella.”\textsuperscript{115} Evidently,
lower-class citizens were quoting the styles of the rich in an attempt to
display social ascendancy, leading another writer to claim in the same year
that these accessories were actually equalizing.\textsuperscript{116} While idealistic, this might
not be entirely true either as ombrelles came in a number of makes and
models. Consider the parasol held by Madame Guillemet in Manet’s \textit{In the
Conservatory} (Fig. 27). The Guillemets were the owners of a fashionable shop
on the rue de Faubourg Saint-Honoré and Madame Guillemet was known for
her impeccable taste.\textsuperscript{117} Though Manet’s broken brushwork makes it difficult
to make out the material that Mme Guillemet’s parasol is made of, it appears
to be somewhat shear, suggesting that it was made of lace. This accessory is
an example of what a wealthy, fashion-forward woman’s parasol might look
like. Another excellent example of this more extravagant style was exhibited
in the show \textit{Impressionism, Fashion, & Modernity} (Fig. 28). This elaborate
parasol is dated to 1860-1869 and is constructed of black silk lace, ivory silk

\textsuperscript{114} Thorstein Veblen, “Conspicuous Consumption,” in \textit{The Rise of Fashion} ed. Daniel
Leonhard Purdy. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 270.
\textsuperscript{115} Thomson, \textit{Seurat}, 121.
\textsuperscript{116} Thomson, \textit{Seurat}, 121.
\textsuperscript{117} Françoise Cachin et al, \textit{Manet, 1832-1883 : Galeries nationales du Grand Palais,
Paris, April 22-August 8, 1983, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
435.
Bradley Collins, “Manet's 'In the Conservatory' and ‘Chez le Père Lathuille,’” \textit{Art
faille, and taffeta with a carved ivory handle. Hiner explains that more modest parasols were likely made from simple linen and had handles made of wood. The parasols within *Les Poseuses* appear to be rather basic and, thus, a juxtaposition between these women and those of the bourgeoisie, in a market defined by the elite, places them once again in a less respected or, in this case, less admired position.

Similarly, hats also played important social and economical roles in nineteenth-century fashion. Crane argues that they represented an opportunity for lower-class citizens to wear items very similar to those of the middle and upper class due to their more “modest” cost in comparison with items like jackets and dresses. The equalizing nature of this accessory was enhanced, according to Philippe Perrot in *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, by the fact that hats could be altered with any number of accouterments. These additions could be almost anything and included, but were not limited to, feathers, flowers, lace, and ribbon. Due to the fact that the overall look of this accessory could be altered on a daily basis, lower-class consumers were able to inexpensively

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120 Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing*, 82.
alter their appearance for next to nothing in costs. As a result, the hat was by far the most functional item in the nineteenth-century lady’s wardrobe. Furthermore, because hats of the upper and lower classes were more similar in design and appearance than any other fashion item, they were more indicative of “conspicuous consumption instead of relaying coded-signals referring to social rank.”

The hats depicted in Les Poseuses have additionally sparked a bit of scholarly discussion with regard to their appearance. Françoise Cachin is one of a number of scholars who has noted that there is a marked difference between the appearance of the hats in Seurat’s preparatory drawings for Les Poseuses (Fig. 29) and his final canvas. She remarks that

Seurat made some striking changes when he moved from the study to the final painting....The brim of the hat was turned up more sharply and its crown was pointed—the little straw hat of the drawing became more of a caricature.

While no specific explanation for this change exists, the concept is rather intriguing. Nochlin, however, suggests that Seurat’s later depiction of fashion items in works like Young Woman Powdering Herself and Chahut either considered the act of self-decoration or used them to imply things about the setting of a given work. Whether this is true of Les Poseuses is unclear.

123 Crane, Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing, 83.
125 Cachin, “Poseuses,” 292.
Additionally, in caricaturing the fashion items of the women he depicts, Seurat simultaneously draws attention to the more ridiculous and/or negative perceptions of models in nineteenth-century France while still maintaining his perfect nudes. Maintaining the flawlessness of these bodies was tantamount as *Les Poseuses* likely began as a means of disproving critics who did not believe that Seurat’s new pointillist technique could properly depict the nude.\(^{127}\) By using fashion accessories to parody the personalities of models Seurat was able to subtly comment on the stereotypes that surrounded these women without uprooting his original goal.

In addition to the comments on the nature of hats that Cachin makes, Nochlin says,

> it is almost as though the vivid dynamism of the shapes and forms of inanimate clothing... is far more alive than the static contours of the living models themselves. This strategy, a pathetic fallacy of sorts...fetishizing objects associated with women’s bodies like gloves, hats and stockings.\(^{128}\)

Though it is not clear if the hats in *Les Poseuses* are particularly fetishized, Nochlin’s statement ascribes a sense of agency to these items. The shapes, colors, and placement of the accessories take on a meaning of their own when the implications of these elements are examined. The point that Nochlin made brings about an extremely provocative discussion of another ladies fashion item—the stocking.

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\(^{127}\) Cachin, “*Poseuses, 1886-1888,*” 273.

\(^{128}\) Nochlin, “Body Politics: Seurat’s Poseuses,” 231.
She comments on the seated model on the right hand side of the painting saying, “This is an interesting pose and type, in that the topos of the pulling on (or off) of stockings is usually firmly located within the genre of female erotica.” In order to support her claim, Nochlin points to another painting that can be found in the Barnes Collection. Entitled Woman with White Stockings (Fig. 30) the image by Gustave Courbet is markedly different from Les Poseuses due to its blatant sexuality. The scene, like many others by the Realist painter, is overtly sexualized in that the viewer not only sees the woman depicted removing her stockings, but her exposed genitalia as well. The position of this figure even seems to, on some level, anticipate Courbet’s Origin of the World, which was completed two years later. Regardless of the appearance of stockings in both paintings, however, the explicit eroticism of Woman with White Stockings contrasts too greatly with the subtle sexuality of Les Poseuses to serve as a valuable comparison. As will be pointed out, there are other nineteenth-century images of women putting on or removing stockings that remain sexualized in nature and relate more closely to Seurat’s canvas.

One place in which images of women caught in the act of putting on or removing stockings could be found was in nineteenth-century print publications. In her book, Paris Fashion: A Cultural History, Valerie Steele

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discusses one such publication called *Le Vie Parisienne*. Referred to as “the Playboy of its day,” *La Vie Parisienne* was known to publish risqué images of women. An image, which Steele includes in her discussion of the “magazine,” depicts a woman having a pair of stockings put on to (or taken off of) her bare and exposed leg (Fig. 31). There is no doubt that the sight of this naked extremity in modest nineteenth-century society would have been a titillating view, but the presence of this action within a gentleman’s magazine solidifies the fact that Nochlin is correct in suggesting that the taking off/putting on of a stocking carries with it an inherent sexual connotation.

Steele also talks about stockings in her essay “Édouard Manet, *Nana*” which appears in the catalog for the exhibition *Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity*. Here, she mentions *Nana* (Fig. 32) and *Woman Fastening Her Garter* (Fig. 33) which both depict ladies with their blue stockings exposed. The publication focuses on the nature of colored undergarments and their prevalence in nineteenth-century Paris. Evidently the proper woman wore chaste, white undergarments. Colored undergarments were viewed as suspect, as owning an item that was even a subtle “tea-rose” in color was

133 Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural*, 120.
meant to be looked at. The woman who possessed any sort of colored undergarment was promiscuous as her forbidden and hidden attire was an unspoken invitation to be looked at in the most intimate way. This fact reinforces the sexualized nature of stockings suggested by Nochlin. The viewer can assume then that the green stockings worn by the model on the right-hand side of *Les Poseuses* exemplify an attempt to sexualize the models, which have been referred to as “not very glamorous” and “blasé posers.”

There are, however, other explanations for Seurat’s use of colored stockings. Perrot states in *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie* that, “Stockings were subject to the rule of white or light colors. Greens and reds sometimes worn at the beach or in the country were never seen elsewhere.” While the artist seems to have sexualized his figures in the act of dressing, Seurat may have also been leaving clues as to the identity of the models. The change may suggest that one of these women wore green stockings because she was not from the city and had, perhaps, recently moved to Paris.

Like stockings, other accessories found in *Les Poseuses* were perceived to have a sexual connotation. Among these were gloves and shoes, but upon further consideration it appears that these accessories served the contradictory purpose of fetishizing and chastening the sensual extremities of

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139 Steele, “Édouard Manet, *Nana*,” 129.
142 Interestingly, the green stockings of the right hand model were originally a “pink-beige” in color when Seurat completed his painted study for this figure. (See Cachin, 285-286.)
hands and feet. Perrot says that gloves covered “the organs of touch and prehension.” ¹⁴³ These items at once protected and drew attention to the inherently sexual extremities. Feet, however, were more explicitly eroticized in nineteenth-century France. ¹⁴⁴ Women’s dresses were generally quite long at this time, hiding a lady’s feet from the world. ¹⁴⁵ Men were naturally curious about these hidden extremities and the accessories that encased them. The presence of empty shoes strewn across the canvas of Les Poseuses indicated the presence of bare feet—an undeniably titillating view.

Shoes also played an important role in the appearance of social stature in the nineteenth century. Veblen wrote in The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions that the “woman’s shoe adds the so-called French heel to the evidence of enforced leisure... because the high heel obviously makes any, even the simplest and most necessary manual work, extremely difficult.” ¹⁴⁶ Taking a closer look at the two pairs of shoes visible within Les Poseuses, it is clear that they are heeled shoes. By wearing these items the women appear to be exhibiting a desire to be understood as a member of the leisure class. Even though they were known to be working-class in nature, they strove to be recognized as otherwise. ¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Perrot, 106.
¹⁴⁴ Perrot, 105-106.
¹⁴⁵ Perrot, 105-106.
¹⁴⁶ Veblen, 280.
¹⁴⁷ Unlike many other professions available to the lower class, modeling did offer some opportunities for social mobility. Some became actresses, singers, or a grande dame by marriage. Victorine Meurent, the model of Manet’s Olympia, even became a well-respected artist in her own right. (See Lathers, 26 and Lipton, 85.)
While fashion accessories have been considered thus far in terms of their ability to intimate different aspects of the models’ personality, they could also signify ethnicity and/or construct an alternative identity for these women. As discussed in Chapter Two, Seurat created a modernization of the Other within *Les Poseuses*. In earlier Orientalist works, fashion accessories, as well as other props, were fundamental in developing “believable” images of the Other. By comparing the models to figures in any number of Orientalist works, the viewer can see that their identity as the Other is closely related to the objects that surround them. Take, for instance, the figures in Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers* from 1834. Lush, richly colored fabrics, lavish jewelry, and a hookah surround the women. Over time these items became signifiers for the stereotypical Other within Orientalist paintings. Images by Ingres such as *Grande Odalisque* and *Odalisque with Slave* (Fig. 34) possess not only these quintessential ornate fabrics and hookah, but also, rather significantly, fans. This mutual accessory of both Seurat’s models and these Oriental women creates a suggestive parallel. In essence, Seurat has suggested that the women of *Les Poseuses* are in some way morally or physically related to the widely accepted nineteenth-century construction of the Other. The fact that he drew these connections in an age that continued to distrust the Other is extremely telling as to the perceived social status of models.

The most obvious marker of this status emanates from the fact that models were considered members of the working class. At the end of the
nineteenth century, more than seventy-three percent of the population of France was considered lower class.\textsuperscript{148} Working women, like those portrayed in \textit{Les Poseuses}, were certainly part of this percentage and, yet, despite their modest income, they still represented a large portion of the consumer base in the fashion market. Crane notes that in the years following 1875 there was a surge of consumerism within the lower class and that by this time at least ninety-three percent of the population claimed that they owned at least one “fashionable” item.\textsuperscript{149} The number of items owned by an individual was unquestionably higher within the city of Paris as, “dressing fashionably was seen as necessary for participating in social activities and for upward mobility—a goal believed to be actively sought out by models.”\textsuperscript{150}

Young, single working women in Paris were perhaps the greatest consumers within the lower class due to the fact that they had no families to provide for and could, therefore, dedicate a majority of their income to the pursuit of a more refined and stylish wardrobe.\textsuperscript{151} Despite the fact the Baudelaire wrote \textit{The Painter of Modern Life} over twenty years before the completion of \textit{Les Poseuses}, he commented generally on the comparison and disparity between the classes. These differences can then be easily noted

\textsuperscript{148} Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 4.
\textsuperscript{149} Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 54.
\textsuperscript{150} Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 60.
\textsuperscript{151} Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 29.
within the canvas. According to him, these differences became clear when the viewer considered the lavishness of an individual’s fashion accessories.\footnote{Baudelaire, \textit{The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays}, 35.} The items, such as parasols, gloves, dresses, and fans, as discussed in this chapter, were not likely to have been of the same quality as those purchased by the bourgeoisie, but they do indicate a deep desire by the lower-class models to emulate those in the social strata above them.\footnote{Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 60. Hiner, \textit{Accessories to Modernity}, 110.}

Crane’s close study of working-class women also offers a number of interesting insights into the specific manner in which women like the models in \textit{Les Poseuses} dressed. For instance, it appears that working women chose to predominantly wear dresses and coats of black and other dark colors.\footnote{Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 51.} Veblen said, “It goes without saying that no apparel can be considered elegant, or even decent, if it shows the effect of manual labor on the part of the wearer, in the way of soil or wear.”\footnote{Veblen, “Conspicuous Consumption,” 278.} When the viewer considers the women in the painting, it looks as though they have dresses of either black or navy blue. Darker clothing likely suited working-class women more as they did not dirty easily and, therefore, did not have to be washed as frequently as dresses made of lighter colors. Furthermore, a dress of a dark color was seen as interchangeable for any number of occasions such as mass, weddings, and

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\footnote{Baudelaire, \textit{The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays}, 35.}
\footnote{Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 60. Hiner, \textit{Accessories to Modernity}, 110.}
\footnote{Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 51.}
\footnote{Veblen, “Conspicuous Consumption,” 278.}
funerals.\textsuperscript{156} In short, black, grey, and navy blue clothing (among others) stood up better to the strenuous and more active lifestyle of the working class.

Crane also references a quote from the middle of the nineteenth century that reads, “Women wore startling combinations of colors, a sharp contrast to the modest pastels, grays and browns of ladies’ street wear.”\textsuperscript{157} This habit may be related to a greater issue that is still seen in fashion consumption today. It is noted that by the time the lower classes obtained the means to purchase what was considered “fashionable” at any given point in time, it had already lost its luster to the upper class and they had moved on to a new style, color, or accessory.\textsuperscript{158} This can also be seen in current fashion trends. Often those of a lower income will buy a particular item when it goes on sale, but the sheer fact that it is finally affordable indicates that it has likely already gone out of style at the top of the economic pyramid. The items that go on sale are also generally only available in less desirable colors. Perhaps a version of this scenario accounts for the myriad of colors worn by working class women in nineteenth-century France, including those in \textit{Les Poseuses}, who can be seen to have accessories of many different colors.

Seurat may have also been emulating a significant pictorial element of the Parisian consumer culture, which would have been accessible to women of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{156} Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 51.  
\textsuperscript{157} Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 60.  
\textsuperscript{158} Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, 6.}
all class levels, in his creation of *Les Poseuses*—the fashion plate. Ruth Iskin claims in *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting* that, “The reach of...Paris fashion crossed national boundaries through fashion plates, reproduced in journals and also sold independently...They usually depicted a fashionable Parisienne...appropriately dressed for the activity.” ¹⁵⁹ For women of the nineteenth century these fashion plates were extremely didactic. ¹⁶⁰ Because these images were often situational, women were not only instructed as to how they should dress, but also how they were expected to comport themselves in various situations.

Obviously, the main objective of fashion plates was the accurate and detailed representation of clothing, which showed items from the best angles so as to ensure that the viewer saw all of a particular item’s most attractive features. ¹⁶¹ Often, in order to achieve this, illustrators would place multiple women within a single scene, and pose them looking in different directions. An example of this can be seen in a fashion plate included in Mark Roskill’s article “Early Impressionism and the Fashion Plate” (Fig. 35). ¹⁶² The image depicts three women in similar stylish dresses standing on a patio of some

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sort. Each look in a different direction—from the left: front, profile, and back—so as to see a dress of a particular design from every angle. Although Emile Zola and others have argued that Impressionists did not take cues from, “unintelligible and banal fashion plates,” Roskill challenges this notion in his brief, yet, groundbreaking article.\textsuperscript{163} He points to the fact that the configuration of many Impressionist works such as Monet’s \textit{Women in the Garden} (Fig. 36) and a number of works by Cézanne suggest that not only were artists aware of fashion plates, but regularly used them as a source of inspiration for their work.\textsuperscript{164}

Taking a look at \textit{Les Poseuses}, the viewer can easily infer the influence that fashion plates had on Seurat and his art. The three models are viewed from three different angles in a manner similar to those in the fashion plate from \textit{La Monde Élagante}—from left: back, front, and profile. In depicting the models in this way Seurat has quietly represented the women as arbiters of fashion. Interestingly enough, Crane says that stylish working-class women who were employed by department stores were referred to as “the queens of the urban proletariat” as they were seen as the ideal example of style among the lower-class French.\textsuperscript{165} The implication of this statement is potentially rather significant if working-class women were, even in some small way,

\textsuperscript{163} Steele, \textit{Paris Fashion: A Cultural}, 123.
\textsuperscript{164} Roskill, “Early Impressionism and the Fashion Plate,” 391-393.
\textsuperscript{165} Crane, \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing}, 61.
accepted as an exemplar of style. If so, the perception of Seurat’s three models and others like them could be entirely different.

At first glance, the women in *Les Poseuses* appear to be the least likely example of Seurat’s interest in fashion given their nudity. Upon more careful consideration, however, it can be seen that the three models are a highly refined depiction of the modern working-class woman who, though stigmatized as a result of her profession, was an integral part of the fashion and consumer culture of nineteenth-century Paris. By positioning the three women in a manner similar to the figures in fashion plates, the artist attempts to acknowledge this fact. However, in attempting to better understand their place in society and the significance of the fashion items that surround them, it appears that Seurat is simultaneously exploring the role of fashion as well as using something as arbitrary as that to classify an entire subset of French citizens by their ethnic identity and perceived moral tendencies.
CHAPTER 4

ON THE LEFT: A CONSIDERATION OF LA GRANDE JATTE IN LES POSEUSES

One of the greatest unsolved mysteries that surrounds Seurat’s *Les Poseuses* is the question as to why his earlier painting, *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte*, appears on the left-hand side of the canvas. Discussion of its presence comes up in many studies of Seurat’s work, including those that only briefly mention *Les Poseuses* and even in more focused considerations of *La Grande Jatte*. As a result, many have postulated the artist’s reason for inserting the older canvas into the background of *Les Poseuses*, but no one has yet considered these unsubstantiated theories against wider scholarship in order to consider their plausibility. I postulate that by inserting *La Grande Jatte* into the background of *Les Poseuses*, Seurat was again attempting to acknowledge the social status and public perception of models in nineteenth-century France. This chapter will first seek to assemble some of the most visible suggestions made over time in order to evaluate the potential accuracy of each, but, ultimately, it will argue that *La Grande Jatte’s* presence within *Les Poseuses* intentionally called attention to the place of models in French culture.
Seurat began work on *La Grande Jatte* on May 22, 1884.  

The introverted artist provided this date himself in a letter written to Felix Fénéon in which he insisted that he began working on the painting on Ascension Day, 1884. Preparation for this work was vigorous and required numerous visits to the small Île de la Grande Jatte located in the northwest of Paris. Over the two year period it took Seurat to finish this monumental work, he completed 27 drawings, 27 panels, and 3 canvases which culminated in the 81 ½ by 121 ¼ inches painting the public knows today. When the image debuted at the final Impressionist Exhibition showcasing his newly established pointillist method, it received somewhat mixed reviews. At the time of the show and in subsequent years, *La Grande Jatte* has been accused of being somewhat automatic and soulless. Regardless of its criticisms, however, Seurat’s supporters claimed the work to be a triumph. It was even referred to by Maurice Hermel in *La France Libre* as, “the banner of a new

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169 Herbert, “Un dimanche à la Grande Jatte, 1884-1886,” 170 & 173. The image resides at the Art Institute of Chicago.
171 Herbert, *Seurat and the Making of La Grande Jatte*, 130. These critiques are particularly interesting as Fénéon, one of his greatest champions, praised the work calling it a, “monotonous and patient spotting tapestry.” (See Herbert, 130.) Evidently the same element of the work that earned Seurat criticism, won him favor among members of the new avant-garde. It was truly a mark of the changing tides in French art.
school.”¹⁷² For Seurat, who had expressed a desire to establish a new school, there was likely no higher compliment.¹⁷³

In an obituary published *L’Art moderne* Kahn described Seurat’s studio in meticulous detail saying it was,

> A small, monastic room, it contained a low, narrow bed, facing some of the old canvases, the *Baignade*, and some seascapes...a red divan, a few chairs, a small table on which sat side by side some friendly reviews, books by young authors, brushes and pigments, and his horn of tobacco. Standing against a panel, covering it completely, the *Grande Jatte*, which he studied again and again with a restlessness ever renewed, searching out all the tiniest defects, seeking perpetually to satisfy his conscience.¹⁷⁴

This seemingly tedious inventory of the studio’s content is actually invaluable to the study of *Les Poseuses*. The model on the left-hand side of the canvas sits on the corner of a red divan. Additionally, the massive *La Grande Jatte* leans against the left wall. As the space that the models occupy matches the description so painstakingly given by Kahn, it is clear that the setting of *Les Poseuses* is Seurat’s private studio on the Boulevard Clichy.¹⁷⁵ While the viewer may have guessed this based on the subject of the work, Kahn’s words solidify this fact, leaving little room for debate.

By definitively placing *Les Poseuses* within Seurat’s Boulevard Clichy studio, it could be said that the presence of *La Grande Jatte* is reasonably

¹⁷⁵ Gustave Kahn, “Seurat,” 22. Kahn mentions that Seurat’s studio was on the Boulevard Clichy.
explained. It is entirely possible that Seurat was simply seeking to accurately depict the space in which the models undressed in an effort to create a totem of modernity. But is this truly the reason (or the only reason) that the *La Grande Jatte* appears in the background of *Les Poseuses*? Does the simple fact that it happened to be in the within the space satisfactorily explain its presence? Or is there perhaps something else at play here? Scholarship seems to find this straightforward explanation unlikely, or at least unsatisfying, as different theories have been proposed over the years.

Another rather feasible explanation for Seurat’s choice is that he was attempting to counter critiques and correct mistakes of the earlier work. As mentioned earlier, while *La Grande Jatte* received glowing reviews from Seurat’s supporters, even they questioned whether or not pointillism could achieve success as a means of depicting interiors and the classic nude. Seurat began work on *Les Poseuses* between late 1886 and early 1887. This start date follows fast on the heels of the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition and *La Grande Jatte’s* first reviews. Given Seurat’s meticulous reputation, it is possible that he was attempting to react swiftly to the criticisms of skeptics. When the critic, Arsène Alexandre, met Seurat in the period

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176 Images of models within the studio of the artist were quite prevalent at the time. (See Chapter One.)
177 Cachin, “*Poseuses, 1886-1888,*” 273. It was generally acknowledged that his work in pointillist landscapes was quite accomplished.
178 Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde,* 111.
179 Seurat was jokingly nicknamed “the notary” by Degas. Pierre Courthion cites his particular nature saying that he worked rigorously only taking a break for lunch, arrived at his family home for dinner at the same time every night, and was always
between 1886 and 1888, he commented on the artist’s work on Les Poseuses saying, “This time he meant to prove that his theory, so well-suited to plein-air subjects was applicable to large-scale figures and interiors.”

Perhaps by including La Grande Jatte in this work Seurat was hoping to assert that his pointillist technique could capture both landscapes and interiors as well as clothed figures and nudes.

Mary Matthews Gedo posits an alternate, yet related, theory in her article, “The Grande Jatte as the Icon of a New Religion: A Psycho-Iconographic Interpretation,” that coincides with Seurat’s almost compulsive need to prove himself and his technique. While she says that the reason for La Grande Jatte’s presence remains a mystery, she claims that it allowed Seurat to “correct” defects that appeared on the canvas shortly after its completion. She notes that many of the painting’s green and orange dots had faded, diminishing the luminosity Seurat had worked so hard to create. By including La Grande Jatte in Les Poseuses Gedo claims that it “appears as a shimmering mirage, less substantial than its original conception, but far more luminous.”

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While the aforementioned theories all appear to be viable rationalizations for Seurat’s juxtaposition of the two paintings, scholars and critics have also suggested more abstract reasoning for the artist’s decision. In Seurat’s own time, several prominent viewers took an interest in this anomaly, including Kahn, Adam, and Fénéon. Adam’s statement regarding the interplay between Les Poseuses and La Grande Jatte, however, has also inspired a series of subsequent theories as well. Of Les Poseuses he said,

Seurat’s Les Poseuses attains perfection... Here are people in to simplicity of nature, with enigmatical feminine smiles on their lips, with elegant curves and small damsel breasts, and a bloom on their soft skin. And there are people in their Sunday best, stiff, starchy and solemn beneath the balmy summer foliage, their gestures and imposing bearing making them resemble Egyptians processing in devout files across a stelae and sarcophagi.

In a way, Adam’s words subvert expectations. He has aligned the nude models, which are believed to be posing for another picture, with nature and imbued the figures of La Grande Jatte, which are actually in nature, with a sense of artificiality. He refers to this dichotomy as a “synthesis of these two aspects of life.” Over time his words have been reinterpreted and, as a result, new facets of the La Grande Jatte/Les Poseuses relationship are exposed.

184 Thomson, Seurat, 145. This juxtaposition can be considered an anomaly in that it is the only such comparison that the artist ever created within his body of work.
185 Smith, Seurat and the Avant-Garde, 111-112.
186 This is in contrast with Nochlin’s belief that the naked women in Les Poseuses were anything but natural as they were modern women posing in order to be paid. She suggests that these women would not have been seen nude were it not for their profession. (See Nochlin, 220)
187 Thomson, Seurat, 145.
Coinciding with the theme of the previous chapter, Thomson focuses on the implication of clothing in his consideration of these two works. He suggests that the “aspects of life” Adam mentions are the act of being clothed and naked.\footnote{Thomson, \textit{Seurat}, 145.} According to him, the dichotomy of naked/clothed presented in \textit{Les Poseuses} was already an established visual joke in nineteenth-century France.\footnote{Thomson, \textit{Seurat}, 145.} He points to Paul Renouard’s \textit{Couple looking at Ingres’s ‘La Source’} (Fig. 37) of 1880 as an example of the jocular nature that existed when those who were clothed and unclothed were situated in the same space.\footnote{Thomson, \textit{Seurat}, 145.} But fashion also had a more serious purpose in the debate of artificiality and nature. It was able to establish a constructed view of individuals. Take, for instance, the models of \textit{Les Poseuses}. In accumulating so many fashion accessories the women were able to establish an identity for themselves in public that suggested they were well-dressed, perhaps even middle-class, individuals despite the fact that they were most certainly members of the working class. Furthermore, fashion was able to conceal physical appearances such as malnutrition.\footnote{Thomson, \textit{Seurat}, 145.} Gustave Geffroy commented on the, “slimness and the undernourishment,” of the women of \textit{Les Poseuses} saying that it was, “the reality of the metropolis and grueling labor.”\footnote{Thomson, \textit{Seurat}, 145.} Clothing was usually able to conceal this attribute of underfed models, but the necessity of removing their clothing in their studio exposed the truth, highlighting the
“pretentious façade” of fashion. Might *La Grande Jatte* be present in the background to emphasize fashion’s trickery?

At first glance, *La Grande Jatte* appears to be a representation of the middle to upper middle class. Well-dressed individuals promenade through a park that does not seem to reference the urban ubiquities of factories, office, or any sort of labor at all. This assumption is believable enough, especially when compared to Seurat’s earlier canvas, *Une Baignade, Asnières*, which depicts working-class (or perhaps lower middle-class) individuals. Upon closer inspection, however, elements of *La Grande Jatte* begin to show themselves, making it clear that the painting depicts a wide cross-section of individuals from many walks of life—most of them working class.

While initial impressions of *La Grande Jatte* suggest that it should be seen as a foil to models of *Les Poseuses*, it seems far more likely that they are being aligned with one another. The rest of this chapter will focus on one final theory regarding the juxtaposition of *La Grande Jatte* and *Les Poseuses* within the 1886-1888 canvas. It will seek to prove that Seurat was seeking to acknowledge the social status and public perception of the models by inserting his earlier painting onto the left-hand side of the canvas.

When studied more closely, working-class individuals become readily recognizable within *La Grande Jatte* and it is these individuals that served as the first comparisons to the women of *Les Poseuses*. On the bottom left a

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boatman can be identified by his bare, muscular arms. Unlike the dandy seated behind him or the well-dressed gentleman standing in the foreground, this man does not wear a top hat. It is the hat of a man who needed a longer bill to keep the sun from his eyes while working. Just behind him and slightly to the right, a pair of women sit beneath a tree. One woman is seen in profile, holding a parasol and the second is seen only from the back. This woman has been identified in a number of studies as a nurse. There is debate as to whether or not she is, in fact, a wet nurse or a nurse to an elderly patient, but this is of little concern to the matter at hand. Whether her charge is an elderly woman or an infant, she is nevertheless a representation of the working-class presence in *La Grande Jatte*. Finally, towards the back of the painting on the left two soldiers can be seen meandering down the island. The presence of working-class individuals within *La Grande Jatte* serve as a subtle reminder that the women in *Les Poseuses* are also of the working class. By juxtaposing these individuals against one another, Seurat, “asserts that these naked women are workers who are paid for posing.”

In a manner similar to the way that *La Grande Jatte* can be seen on the left-hand side of *Les Poseuses*, the island itself can also be seen in the upper right-hand corner of *Une Baignade, Asnières*. This visual dialogue that

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196 Herbert, “Un dimanche à la Grande Jatte, 1884-1886,” 176. Herbert claims that she is a nurse sitting with her elderly charge.
is established between three of Seurat’s four canvases of combat illustrates an even stronger assertion that the models are of the working class. This connection could not have been unintentional and was clearly an attempt by the artist to create a link between the works and their subjects. Consider Une Baignade, Asnières. The seven figures sit on the bank of the suburb of Asnières and look across the Seine River. In the upper right-hand corner the viewer catches a glimpse of the Île de la Grande Jatte. The boy in the water who wears a hat appears to be shouting across the across the river. Might he be yelling to someone he knows? This act suggests a level of familiarity, intimating that the figures of La Grande Jatte are of the same social status as those seen in Une Baignade, Asnières on the other side of the river. If, then, the viewer accepts this connection, a lineage of sorts has been established among the artist’s most important canvases.

Having established a connection between La Grande Jatte and Les Poseuses that acknowledges the women’s status as working-class, it is time to consider their social status and public perception in nineteenth-century France. Models were widely discriminated against in Seurat’s lifetime and they were often suspected of being sexually promiscuous. Smith claims in Seurat and the Avant-Garde that the term poseuse was even a popular slang for a prostitute. Seurat was undoubtedly aware of these stereotypes and, as will be seen, he used the reputation of the Île de la Grande Jatte and the

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199 Leighton and Thomson, Seurat and The Bathers, 134.
200 Lathers, Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model, 26-27.
201 Smith, Seurat and the Avant-Garde, 114.
assumed identity of those within *La Grande Jatte* to subtly acknowledge the reputation of models.

In Seurat’s time, the Île de la Grande Jatte was referred to as an Island of Cythera on the Seine. In an episode of BBC’s *Private Life of a Masterpiece*, Paul Smith explains that this name, which was taken from the mythological Greek island of love, was in essence a metaphor for prostitution. This reputation for promiscuity was not an isolated one either. Many scholars reference this fact and Smith also points out that Catulle Mendès’ book, *Les Îles d’amour*, which was published in 1886, named the Île de la Grande Jatte one of modern times’ islands of love. Evidently, Guy de Maupassant once claimed that there were so many couples making love on the island some evenings that it was difficult to find a spot for oneself. What’s more is that men did not always come to the island with their significant other, but obtained a lover for a price once there. Prostitution was said to run rampant on the island and on at least one occasion in the late nineteenth century there was a mass arrest of these women of easy virtue on the Île de la Grande Jatte. Although Seurat does

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204 Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 52.  
not depict such illicit acts at play within *La Grande Jatte*, the island's reputation would have been well known by the artist and his viewers.

A figure seen on the left of *La Grande Jatte*, however, references such acts and solidifies the standing of the Île de la Grande Jatte in the mind of the viewer. Along the bank of the river, directly to the left of the nurse, a woman and her companion fish. This was seen as odd by viewers as women were, “neither patient enough to be passionate anglers, nor sufficiently cerebral to be contemplative ones.”\(^{207}\) A woman fishing was “fishy.”\(^{208}\) This perturbed viewers due to the fact that in popular culture of the nineteenth century it was common to say that prostitutes “fished” for lovers.\(^{209}\) More than this, however, Seurat experiments with wordplay again in order to express a deeper meaning. The French term for “fishing” was “pêche,” while the word for “sin” was “péche.”\(^{210}\) In alluding to the prevalence of prostitution on the island Seurat has established a backdrop for the women of *Les Poseuses* based on the notion of sin through lustful acts.

Cachin was one of the first to acknowledge a connection between the figures in *La Grande Jatte* and *Les Poseuses* saying, “…it is as if the central model, no less erect than the woman walking, has stepped down from her picture, disrobed, and turned toward us, coolly sizing us up.”\(^{211}\) This

\(^{207}\) Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 53.

\(^{208}\) Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 53.

\(^{209}\) Thomson, *Seurat*, 123.

\(^{210}\) Thomson, *Seurat*, 123.

\(^{211}\) Cachin, *Poseuses, 1886-1888,* 278.
comparison to the woman in the foreground of *La Grande Jatte*, who dominates the portion of the work shown, is very important.

This figure has, on more than one occasion, been referred to as a cocotte.\(^{212}\) It is not her appearance, however, that identifies her as a prostitute, but the animals that accompany her. The small lapdog that can be seen trotting to the left of the seated model on the left-hand side of *Les Poseuses* is the first indicator. Little dogs such as these were popular as pets amongst prostitutes.\(^{213}\) By placing one of his models directly next to this dog, Seurat has literally put the indicator of prostitution and the model on the same level. The more peculiar animal owned by this woman, however, is the monkey, which she holds on a leash. Thomson explains that a monkey and the term *singesse*, literally meaning female monkey, were used in popular culture to mean prostitute.\(^{214}\) He suggests that in duplicating the meaning through both verbal and visual means, Seurat clearly meant to make such a reference.\(^{215}\)

Significantly, the monkey is not visible in *Les Poseuses* as the model on the left is seated directly in front of it. There are two possible explanations for the meaning behind this placement. Borzello suggests in *The Artist’s Model* that Seurat “could be making a point about the unjust slur of

\(^{212}\) Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 54. Cocotte is defined as a fashionable prostitute.

\(^{213}\) Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 54.

\(^{214}\) Thomson, *Seurat*, 123. The BBC *Private Life of a Masterpiece* episode delicately suggests that perhaps Seurat is alluding to “monkey business” taking place on the island.

\(^{215}\) Thomson, *Seurat*, 123.
immorality slung at professional models.” 216 While the suggestion is optimistic and compelling, I believe the opposite is more likely. The model has literally been inserted into the place of the singesse, suggesting that she actually has the same qualities of that which she replaces.

This chapter has shown that there are many suggested theories as to why Seurat included *La Grande Jatte* in the background of *Les Poseuses*. Each work stands individually as one of the artist’s most prominent works, but when the implications of their juxtaposition are considered a completely new meaning develops. By conflating the women of *Les Poseuses* with the figures of *La Grande Jatte*, Seurat is recognizing the popular perception of models in nineteenth-century France as women of ill-repute.

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CHAPTER 5
AFTERWARD

When asked by Octave Maus what he would sell *Les Poseuses* for, Seurat famously replied that he would charge “one year at 7 francs a day.” This response, in which Seurat likened himself to a day laborer, suggests that this bourgeois artist understood, if not sympathized with, the working class.

Models were deeply discriminated against in nineteenth-century France. Their profession and ethnicity were used against them in an effort to establish stereotypes and unjust accusations of clandestine prostitution and other personality defects. Seurat was undoubtedly aware of the reputation that these working-class women had and subtly acknowledged this in *Les Poseuses*.

This study sought not to necessarily prove that the accusations against the character of models was untrue, but that they were founded on arbitrary and prejudicial things such as ethnicity and fashion and were alluded to in comparisons with the works of past masters and the earlier work of the artist himself. *Les Poseuses* exemplified the social status and public perception of models in a manner that gave truth to their story while maintaining its importance as one of Seurat’s canvases of combat.

218 Rewald, *Seurat*, 17.
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Figure 4. Georges Seurat, *Les Poseuses*, 1886-1888, oil on canvas, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
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Figure 7. Gentile Bellini, *Dispersed Album, Seated Scribe*, 1479-1481, manuscript, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts
Figure 8. Carle Vanloo (Charles André van Loo), *Sultan’s Wife Drinking Coffee*, 1755, oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia
Figure 9. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Grande Odalisque*, 1814, oil on canvas, Louvre Museum, Paris, France
Figure 10. Eugène Delacroix, *Odalisque Reclining on Divan*, 1825, oil on canvas, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, United Kingdom
Figure 11. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Artist’s Model*, 1890, oil on canvas, Dahesh Museum of Art, New York, New York
Figure 12. J.E. Dantan, *The Model’s Lunch*, 1881 (medium and location not listed)
Figure 13. Henri-Fantin Latour, Studio Scene, January 16, 1865, drawing, Louvre Museum, Paris, France
Figure 14. Édouard Manet, *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882, oil on canvas, The Courtauld Gallery, London, United Kingdom
Figure 15. Georges Seurat, *Copy after Ingres’s Stratonice*, circa 1876, pencil, Private Collection
Figure 16. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Antiochus and Stratonice*, 1840, oil on canvas, Musée Condé de Chantilly, Chantilly, France
Figure 17. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Valpinçon Bather*, 1806, oil on canvas, Louvre Museum, Paris, France
Figure 18. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Source*, 1820-1856, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 19. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Turkish Bath*, 1862, oil on wood, Louvre Museum, Paris, France
Figure 20. Eugène Delacroix, *The Sultan of Morocco and His Entourage*, 1845, oil on canvas, Musée des Augustins, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Toulouse, Toulouse, France
Figure 21. Eugène Delacroix, *Jewish Wedding in Morocco*, circa 1839, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France
Figure 22. Eugène Delacroix, *Women of Algiers*, 1834, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France
Figure 23. Georges Seurat, *Poseuse de dos*, late 1886, oil on wood, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 25. Georges Seurat, *Young Woman Powdering Herself (with multi-spectral scanning enhancement in upper left-hand corner)*, 1890, oil on canvas, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, United Kingdom
Figure 25. Georges Seurat, *Young Woman Powdering Herself*, 1890, oil on canvas, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, United Kingdom
Figure 26. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 27. Édouard Manet, *In the Conservatory*, 1878, oil on canvas, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany
Figure 28. Parasol, 1860-1869, black silk lace, ivory silk faille, and taffeta with carved ivory handle, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York
Figure 29. Georges Seurat, *Chapeau et ombrelle*, 1887, conté crayon and white gouache, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York
Figure 30. Gustave Courbet, *Woman with White Stockings*, 1864, oil on canvas, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Figure 31. Image from *La Vie Parisienne* found in *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (No date or artist listed)
Figure 32. Édouard Manet, *Nana*, 1877, oil on canvas, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany
Figure 33. Édouard Manet, *Woman Fastening Her Garter*, 1878-1879, pastel on canvas, Ordrupgaard Art Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark
Figure 34. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with Slave*, 1842, oil on canvas, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland
Figure 35. Fashion Print from *La Monde Élégant*, June 1866 found in “Early Impressionism and the Fashion Print” (No artist listed)
Figure 36. Claude Monet, *Women in the Garden*, circa 1866, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 37. Paul Renouard, *Couple Looking at Ingres’s ‘La Source,’* 1880, from *Les Pensionnaires du Louvre,* Private Collection