

Reading Cisheteronormativity into the Art Historical Archives

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Abstract: Madeleine Lemaire (1845–1928) might appear to be a typical “woman artist” of the Belle Époque, a painter of images of fashionable women, equally popular for her watercolor flowers and her skills as a salon hostess, with biographical sketches of her then and now assuming that if she had sex or romance, it was with men. However, a closer look has also revealed Lemaire to be potentially atypical. Unlike her women colleagues, she exhibited salacious nudes; her work was once described as having “a bit of the mustache”; and she generally dodged discussions of either her gender or her sexuality, even though her social group included those who openly flaunted their own non-conformities. Using archival materials, artworks, and contemporary theory to unpack the possibilities presented by Lemaire’s case, I also explore the gains for art history in reconsidering previously female-identified and straight-seeming artists in more fluid gender and sexual terms. What might we discover if we recognize ourselves as the constructors of a cisheteronormative past, reading into the archives the assumptions that our current culture’s binary norms enforce?

Keywords: gender; sexuality; biography; trans studies; women artists; Belle Époque; still life; salon; historiography

1. Introduction

Madeleine Lemaire (1845–1928) appears, at least initially, to be a relatively typical cisgender, heterosexual woman artist and salonnière of Belle Époque Paris, albeit far more famous than most other similarly identified people during her lifetime. For example, Lemaire was awarded the Chevalier of the Legion d’Honneur (Knight of the Legion of Honor) in 1906, a rare prize that nonetheless followed logically from her many leadership roles in the French art world—as a founding member of the Société d’Acquarellistes Français, the Société des Pastellistes, and the revived Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, and as a Professor of applied design in the study of plants at the Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle, a prestigious 1898 appointment Lemaire supplemented by opening a private art school. Lemaire also received a number of awards, including an Honorable Mention in painting at the 1877 French Salon and both a silver and a gold medal at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900.¹ Although rarely mentioned in art history today, Lemaire was sometimes described in contemporaneous popular publications as the most famous woman artist alive;² she was also frequently characterized as an heir to the throne of the exceptional Rosa Bonheur in both renown and ability.³ Unlike Bonheur, who visibly challenged tenuous but normative gender and sexuality binaries in her lifetime by winning legal permission to wear pants and maintaining intimate domestic companionships with women, Lemaire was legally married to someone we assume to be a man, gave birth to a child (as far as the record is able to show), and even went by the surname of her husband for the bulk of her career, including long after their legal separation. In a few sources, it is suggested that she might have been a lover of Alexandre Dumas fils,⁴ although none of these sources support this suggestion with persuasive evidence (rather, it is usually presented as rumor).⁵ Those still working to resuscitate the lost careers of now-obscure women artists who were genuinely lauded in their own lifetimes have much to use and celebrate from the history of Madeleine Lemaire.⁶



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Yet it is my contention here that understanding Lemaire as a cisgender, heterosexual woman artist is itself a *decision* we art historians (including myself) have made, consciously or not, and one we continue to make with any number of artists for whom it *might* not be the case. Artists who have not been canonized by our discipline can also have challenging archives, full of gaps and idiosyncrasies that require special care around our own ways of looking for and identifying what counts as evidence. I would like to question the way I and others have read the archives and subsequent secondary sources regarding Lemaire for the important and fundamental goal of changing our approaches not just in this case, but in *all* our art historical work more broadly.⁷ My intention here is not to definitively label this artist with a specific gender and/or sexual identity, nor is it to contribute to a list of special exceptions that allow us to continue acting as if the remainder need not be thought of otherwise. Rather, it is to combine archival, biographical, and visual analyses with queer theory and trans studies approaches in order to emphasize how our disciplinary norm is to assume, often unthinkingly, that most artists were cisgender and/or heterosexual. My goal is to denaturalize the binary sex/gender system and refocus our scholarly approaches, to the extent that I can, on engagement with a more radical unknowability to replace our longstanding acceptance of epistemologies of ignorance masquerading as objectivity or appropriateness. A caveat to what follows: I will initially separate somewhat the sexuality and gender of this specific subject and the evidence I have encountered about them for purposes of concision and clarity; the question of the disentanglement of gender from sexuality is one that was fraught in the nineteenth century and remains so now, and my doing so is not meant to suggest I think otherwise.

2. Reading a Life More Queerly

First, a few examples of why I think Lemaire might have been queer despite the tendency to assume otherwise. French literary scholar François Proulx has argued as much in an essay in which he persuasively links Lemaire, Marcel Proust, and Proust's lover Reynaldo Hahn in what he calls an "irregular kinship" or queer family structure. It is amply documented that Lemaire introduced Proust to Hahn—as well as to Robert de Montesquiou, who would become the primary model for Proust's queer "Baron de Charlus" in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913–1927)—at her salon on the rue de Monceau in Paris in May 1894. Focusing primarily on Lemaire's apparently maternal role in this grouping—the two lovers sometimes referred to Lemaire as "Maman"—and using Proustian wordplay, Proulx points out that in her last novel of the popular Claudine series, the queer French writer Colette (Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, 1873–1954)

Describes an evening at Madame Lalcade's, a thinly veiled portrayal of the Lemaire salon. In her manuscript, the hostess was Madame Lapaire, which both rhymes with 'Lemaire' and plays with her reputation for gender non-conformity. *Lapaire* can be read as *la-père*, 'the female father', while *Madame La-paire* evokes a woman with a pair, presumably of testes. In his tell-all notes on the Claudine novels, Willy confirms that the character was Lemaire, and suggests that in this final tome 'Colette wanted to drag through the mud all the women with whom she had fooled around [couchotté]'.⁸

This anecdote alone certainly raises the possibility that Lemaire might be queer in gender and/or sexuality, and recognized as such by her contemporaries. Proulx's essay gave me permission to pursue further my percolating sense that Lemaire's history might hold clues to potential non-normativity, despite complete silence on this issue otherwise.

One immediate challenge to this pursuit was the sheer repetitiveness of most references to Lemaire, the bulk of which appear not in art historical scholarship but in that associated with Proust, where Lemaire is usually seen as a secondary figure who introduced him to the salon life he would so thoroughly skewer in the *Recherche*.⁹ But even there, I soon identified some clues to her queer possibilities, as Lemaire's salon was the site of the introduction not just of Proust, Hahn, and Montesquiou, but also of a whole host of others, including Sarah Bernhardt, Léon Delafosse, Anna de Noailles, Georges Clairin, Jean

Lorrain, Herman Bemberg, Camille Saint-Saëns, Félix Mayol, and other Belle Époque artists and celebrities known to be what we would now call gay, lesbian, bi- or pansexual, and gender non-normative.¹⁰ And here, the celebrity of both Lemaire and her guests provided ample archival documentation, as attendance at these events was described in the popular press as well as in the many memoirs and letters produced by the members of this social circle.¹¹ While obviously, people who we understand to be heteronormative were there as well, Lemaire's studio/salons in Paris and her Marne country estate were explicitly queer gathering spaces, regardless of whether Lemaire was queer herself.¹² Had Proust and Hahn's fondness for their love affair's patron or Willy's interpretation of Colette's intentions represented the entirety of this trail, I might have stopped following it. But instead, the trail proved to be quite populated with the fin-de-siècle's most famous queer folks, about whom there was more overt information, and soon, I was beginning to connect the consistency of regular attendees of Lemaire's salon with their shared challenges to gender and sexual binarism.

While mentions of Lemaire's own romantic life remained at the level of rumor and (mis?)interpretation, her domestic cisheteronormativity was limited to a barely documented marriage to Casimir Lemaire in 1865 that seems to have produced their child Suzette less than a year later. Casimir, also an artist, is almost completely absent from any of the materials on Madeleine, even during their marriage. Archival research indicates that by at least 1879 he had moved out of their shared domestic spaces, the small hôtel on the rue de Monceau in Paris and the Réveillon estate in the Marne, both of which had been given to Madeleine by her aunt Mathilde Herbelin, also an artist. We also know that Madeleine sought and received legal separation from Lemaire in February 1880, and that he died in 1887. Thus far, the biggest challenge in all my archival research has been finding additional documentation of Casimir, who is as absent as one can be from the historical record. Not absent, and in fact omnipresent in newspapers, art journals, paintings, poems, caricatures, and photographs of the time, are Madeleine Lemaire, her art, and her relationships with the most evidently queer people of Belle Époque Paris. Lemaire ran in queer circles, encouraged and invested in queer relationships, and successfully avoided establishing a fixedly cisheteronormative or queer identity, despite public celebrity and the potential benefits of doing so.

3. Reading Art More Queerly

Lemaire's art is also amply documented across sixty years of exhibitions at the most prestigious venues, including the official Salon (where she debuted with a portrait in 1864), the Salon Nationale des Beaux-Arts, the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, the 1897 Venice Biennale, the 1900 Paris Exposition, and group and solo shows at galleries such as Galerie George Petit and Galerie Arthur Tooth. Most frequently described as a flower painter, Lemaire did indeed establish significant expertise and enjoyed major success in that area (Figures 1 and 2); however, even Proust thought it important to remind his *Figaro* readers that she crossed most of the period's accepted genres ("son extraordinaire talent s'étend à tous les genres"/"her extraordinary talent extends to all the genres").¹³ In any case, Lemaire was prolific throughout her long career, resulting in a large body of work that was exhibited and purchased at the time and continues to circulate in the auction market today.



Figure 1. Madeleine Lemaire, *Pan with Dried Flowers*, n.d., oil on canvas, 36 × 25 in. Private Collection.



Figure 2. Lemaire, *Roses in a Basket*, n.d., watercolor, 14 × 20 in. Private Collection.

Like most of her women contemporaries, Lemaire painted images that might, consciously or subconsciously, confirm our temptation to understand her as cisheteronormative. While many artists, regardless of gender, painted floral still lifes, and the most canonized of those from this period are designated as men (e.g., Henri Fantin-Latour, Édouard Manet, and Vincent Van Gogh), flower painting was regularly associated with women and femininity; in any case, their appropriateness as a subject for women painters was never questioned. As we well know, nudes were another matter.¹⁴ And yet, among the vast number of portraits, landscapes, genre scenes, illustrations, and flower paintings Lemaire made are a number of fairly standard academic nudes (e.g., *Le Sommeil*, exhibited at the 1890 SNBA)¹⁵, as well as much more erotically charged representations of nude women, such as *Ophélie* (Figure 3), *Portrait de femme aux rubans bleus* (*Portrait of a Woman with Blue Ribbons*, Figure 4), and *Le sommeil de Manon* (*The Sleep of Manon*, Figure 5).¹⁶



Figure 3. Lemaire, *Ophélie*, ca. 1878, 15 × 9 in. Goupil et Co photogravure of oil on canvas original, location unknown.



Figure 4. Lemaire, *Portrait de femme aux rubans bleus*, n.d., watercolor, 24.2 × 16.7 in. Private Collection. ©ARTCURIAL.



Figure 5. Lemaire, *Le Sommeil de Manon*, ca. 1906, oil on canvas, 41 ¾ × 62 in. Private collection; Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_sommeil_de_Manon,_by_Madeleine-Jeanne_Lemaire,_n%C3%A9e_Coll.jpg (accessed on 7 May 2024).

Such paintings are not entirely unique in the period, and some of Lemaire's male-identified friends were responsible for similarly eroticized but much more famous examples, such as Henri Gervex's *Rolla* (1878).¹⁷ More ink than has ever been spilt on Lemaire's whole body of work has addressed paintings like Gervex's, particularly as they have come to represent a particular brand of acceptably racy heteronormative sexuality under the legitimating guise of literary reference or a display of academic training and skill.¹⁸ Gervex's *Rolla* was a *succès de scandale*, boosting the artist's stature despite the judgment of indecency that led to its removal from the Salon of 1878 prior to the opening. Its indecency was, as detailed by Hollis Clayson, associated more with the removed corset and top hat in the corner and their implications for the phallic threat of the sex worker than with any particular salaciousness of the nude figure itself (or the moralistic story by Alfred Musset from whence the subject was taken).¹⁹

Perhaps ironically, no such scandal seems to have arisen from Lemaire's *Sommeil de Manon*. This painting likewise includes removed clothing on a chair in a corner of the bedroom in which a nude woman reclines, nearly parallel to the picture plane with her head to the right, on a full-sized bed of tousled sheets. Both Gervex's and Lemaire's works also include pillows with ruffled cases, a bedstand in the far right corner of the scene, and drapery disappearing at the top of the canvas; both artists use a palette of pastel blues and pinks contrasting with dark browns and blacks. Where Gervex's paint application is rough and scumbled throughout, Lemaire's appears smoother, with crisp details for the figure and furniture on the right, which then fades into ephemeral abstraction on the draperies and the chair on the left. Lemaire's renowned skill with watercolor techniques is evidenced throughout these passages of washed and layered gray-blue, pale green, and salmon pink, which are then shaded with visible, impressionistic touches of the oil paint actually in use. All furniture and draperies are cropped at the edges and no visible wall or

floor appears from which to reconstruct the space of a specific room. Instead, the viewer's perspective is as if they were perhaps standing in the room with the nude figure. On the left, a foreground chair is turned toward the nude, referencing a second viewing position already filled by a discarded lavender- and salmon-colored gown and a hay-colored wrap or coverlet decorated with flowers and leaves. This discarded clothing almost coalesces into the form of an exhausted feminine figure slouched in the chair and facing the nude on the bed, whose body is turned toward both the chair and the painting's viewer.

Laid across the bed, the nude is presented in an idealized fashion for its time: reclining, hairless, pale, with legs crossed just enough to cover the figure's genitals located at the near-exact center of the painting. Her nipples are pert under carefully painted, gently flexed hands fingering a strand of broken pearls. The arms are akimbo, one projecting off the bed toward the viewer in a way that suggests openness and sexual languor, thereby countering the closed thighs. The figure's eyes are closed, her cheeks flushed, and her red lips slightly open in an expression of satisfaction with what has recently passed. The figure's curly hair, with tints of gray, blue, and black, is still pinned up. Aigrettes, a glass bottle, a powder jar and puff, and what might be either a small sculpture or a candle stick share space atop the partially cropped bedstand at right, while a pulled-out drawer supports a fan and spills forth abstractly painted gold jewelry or ribbons. Tidily placed under the drawer on the lower shelf are two pink silk mules, in line with Lemaire's signature on the most painterly section of the bedsheets. The bed and its side table are both aligned at an angle to the picture plane, receding from the viewer's left to their right. The low, oval velvet bedstead is topped with gilded foliate carving, and surmounting the entire scene is an enormous pale blue drapery gathered slightly to the left of center and spilling over the bedstead in a manner more theatrical than actual. Lemaire's signature roses appear as two pink garlands hanging from the drapery and pressing it into the background. The background drapery, the middle-ground nude on the bed, and the foreground furniture, clothing, and accessories are compressed in tight horizontal thirds; the framing of the pale, luminous white skin of the nude with the darker browns of the furniture in the foreground and the gray drapery in the background creates a scooped-out central oval of space in which the figure rests almost like a pearl in an oyster shell.

Although it is easy (and in fact normative for critics of the time) to imagine a heterosexual, cisgender man as the interpellated viewer of this image, it is not difficult to imagine other types of viewers. We might wonder at Lemaire's skillful adoption of all the tropes of paintings that were usually read in a heteronormative manner, while avoiding the inclusion of masculine objects in the room à la Gervex and suggesting the presence of a feminine figure in the chair. And yet, there seems to have been no comment to this effect from critics at the time, much less any scandal.

4. A Quiet Reception

The comparatively late date of Lemaire's *Sommeil de Manon* may provide sufficient explanation for the different treatment it received vis à vis Gervex, but Lemaire's *Ophélie* dates closer to *Rolla*. Contemporary commentators on this painting described it as "classic", "charming", and "graceful".²⁰ Did its use of literary references suffice to excuse its sexualization beyond the typical académies of most other women painters of her time and place? Because no scandal arose at the time, we are left to speculate based on other contemporaneous cases. Did these paintings stay sufficiently within the bounds of expectations, albeit for cisheteronormative men artists, to pass *accidentally* unnoticed? This is a perfect example of the type of case study that allows us to maintain our cisheteronormative lens, and establishes why I think of Lemaire's work as providing such a compelling basis for challenging it. Had there been an explosion of controversy around these clearly sexualized paintings by an artist assumed to be a cisgender heterosexual woman, then we would have a case more in line with those that have been presented so far in the art historical literature, documenting what critics at the time saw as the potential danger of such imagery. With no

significant critical response at all to Lemaire's paintings, we can only conclude that people did not find them controversial (or perhaps found other works more interestingly so).

In contrast to the nudes of such avant-garde artists as Gustave Courbet and particularly Édouard Manet, the nudes of Gervex, his teacher William Bouguereau, and other popular male-identified artists of the time have become aesthetic straw men for the inevitable rise and dominance of avant-gardism in the art historical canon.²¹ What *all* of these nudes produced in mid to late nineteenth-century France have in common, whether avant-garde or academic, whether perceived as scandalous or status quo, is their association with an *explicitly heterosexual* point of view.²² I have found limited conversation around erotically charged female nudes of the period by artists understood to be women, in part because such images have not tended to be made by women.²³

Historians of late nineteenth century European art have suggested that women artists either avoided nudes altogether or only sketched or painted them with the utmost discretion and propriety. Typical readings of the few such published images by women artists focus on professional development (e.g., nude studies of servants or children to emulate unavailable academic training); subjective self-identification (e.g., the artist appreciating herself in the mirror); and strategic substitution (e.g., depicting a model as a stand-in for the artist or including nude children and babies as within the proper realm of the feminine and/or domestic).²⁴ An objectifying, sexually desirous gaze has rarely been brought into play in considering how women artists from Lemaire's generation depicted nudes, and the nudes by them that have been published have helped support this omission.²⁵ These include Berthe Morisot's *Devant le psyche* (1890), Suzanne Valadon's *Nude Arranging Her Hair* (ca. 1916), or any of the legion "Woman and Child" paintings by Mary Cassatt. Such images are not so overtly sexualized as to demand that we consider them as such, and the enforced heteronormative gaze of art history has assumed they are not. As Tirza True Latimer has argued, even "[f]eminist art historians privileging gender (and therefore heterosexual power relations) as an interpretive axis have all but neglected the equally crucial problematic of sexual identity".²⁶ But we can read Lemaire's *overtly* sexualized nudes as, at minimum, raising the possibility that the artist might have been, as her friends Gervex and Bouguereau have assumed to have been, representing what was sexually attractive to the artist.

It might seem risky for Lemaire to paint these unusually salacious nudes given a context of supposed propriety, but they were publicly exhibited to no apparent uproar—and they also appeared with limited, if any, comment in newspapers and journals of the period that otherwise regularly featured Lemaire. Where we have a contemporaneous critical response, it is positive or neutral, with no veiled commentary on the sexual content of Lemaire's work. For example, Albert Wolff, writing about the display of two of these works at the SNBA, says merely "But Madame Madeleine Lemaire did not intend to give up large-scale painting and she returns to us with two works, *The Sleep* and a charming *Ophelia*, whose grace our readers can appreciate in our reproduction".²⁷ Lemaire was a celebrity in her lifetime, a painter well known enough to have received critical censure for the audacious sexiness of these works if they were deemed to be breaking social codes. Was the presumption of heteronormativity so strong as to have overridden any such concerns? Or were critics politely sidestepping the potential for scandal around a popular member of the social elite? We cannot be certain, as no more pointed commentary exists. And this creates problems for historical and archival analyses—problems that make it easier to maintain our heteronormative thinking, because there is no obvious, direct challenge to it.

5. Unlearning Our Norms

It is that *lack* of scandal or even critical censure that seems most important to me here, because I am arguing that we must not let this lack of documentation keep us from speculating about the possibility that Lemaire might have been queer in gender or sexuality, especially (but not only) when the artworks encourage us to challenge those assumptions and drop our cisheteronormative gaze. Always assuming that a historical subject was

heterosexual and requiring a stated claim to the contrary to be considered otherwise is a closeting that does more damage than historical outing. In fact, claims that it is problematic to “out” a historical figure without perfect evidence appear homo- and/or transphobic considering how often the opposite type of presumption is made without question—as it has been about Lemaire despite what I have presented here. Without any documentary evidence, we art historians assume cisgender heterosexuality constantly. But we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that people can seem heterosexual on paper and turn out not to be; we also know that sexuality and gender are not inherently binary, and have never been, regardless of the moral and social norms and legal standards of any given period or location. Thus, failing to consider the wide variety of genders and sexualities any of our subjects might have adopted and engaged limits the historical accuracy of our work. In other words, our present tactic is to assume a cisgender, heterosexual subject first, and then require strong evidence to change our minds.²⁸ This “research cisheteronormativity” can infect even those of us who are ourselves queer in gender and/or sexuality, although (or perhaps because) we are often seen to be projecting overmuch onto our subjects.²⁹

If we can read the more overtly sexualized images like *Ophélie, Portrait de femme aux rubans bleus*, and *Le sommeil de Manon* as possible representations of Lemaire’s own queer desire (whether as a lesbian woman, a straight trans man, a queer non-binary person, etc.), then we can read the less overtly sexualized images that way too. Elsewhere, I have written about the way that Lemaire’s flower painting could be understood as constructing a queer floral heterotopia for her “irregular kin” as Proulx would call them—but accepting the potential of Lemaire’s desire for women can transform our understanding of her representational work very quickly. For example, a Lemaire illustration for Ludovic Halevy’s *L’Abbé Constantine* (*Abbot Constantine*, 1882) shows two women embracing on a settee (Figure 6). In the text, two sisters are discussing potential suitors and the distressingly concomitant separation they will face—a situation we can read in comfortably heteronormative ways. Imagining a Lemaire whose love for women is romantic and/or sexual, we can also start to see a deeper connection between the two “sisters” required by normativity to part and end their love but enjoying each other’s touch nonetheless. This perspective then finds support in the text itself, where Bettina refers to her sister Suzie as “naughty” and claims that she loves her “too much; you fill my heart; you have occupied it entirely; there is no room for anyone else. Prefer anyone to you! Love anyone more than you! That will never, never be!”³⁰ We can make identical moves for Lemaire’s illustration of Part II, Canto III, section XII of Owen Meredith’s *Lucile* (Meredith 1897). Here, the eponymous heroine guides her friend Matilda home and away from the attentions of the Duke (Figure 7). Lemaire has chosen to illustrate the phrase in the text, highlighted below it in the illustration: “Wound one arm around her waist unresisted”. What could initially be read as a friend helping a friend becomes a choice by a queer illustrator to amplify a part of the text in which two women physically grasp each other and remove to the house, where Lucile then “knelt down, flung her arms round Matilda, and press’d to her own The poor bosom beating against her”.³¹

These images of two women clutching each other amiably or desperately align with others by Lemaire, including her oil painting *Les Fées* (*The Fairies*) (ca. 1908, Figure 8) in which a pattern continues of a brunette hanging on to a blonde, who, in this instance, seem more like two tipsy friends at the end of a party. Innocent enough, perhaps. But also, once the pattern can be seen, particularly in light of the other more clearly sexualized images from the same artist, we start to change how we read this imagery.³² This then changes how we see Lemaire’s art, how we see the period, and—ideally—how we might see the art historical canon more broadly. Might we have queer images hiding in plain sight, simply because Lemaire never sought legal permission to wear pants or live with younger women partners as did Rosa Bonheur? Or because (as far as we know) she never walked around Paris with her fingers interlaced in a lover’s like contemporary Louise Abbéma did with Sarah Bernhardt?³³



Figure 6. Lemaire, *Confidence*, photogravure of watercolor original, $10 \frac{3}{4} \times 9 \frac{1}{2}$ in. Published in Ludovic Halevy, *L'Abbé Constantin*, New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1887, 97. Scan by author.



Figure 7. Lemaire, “Wound One Arm Round Her Waist Unresisted”, watercolor facsimile, $10 \frac{3}{4} \times 8 \frac{1}{2}$ in. Published in Owen Meredith, *Lucile*, New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1897, 263. Photograph by author, Robert Sterling Clark Collection of Rare Books, Clark Art Institute Library, clarkart.edu.

I believe we can and should read all of Lemaire’s artworks as potentially queer, as we have no reason not to and several reasons why we might. But I would also like to take my argument to its logical conclusion. That is, if putting the possibility that Lemaire *might* have been queer on the table forces us to see all of her images queerly, and if we should consider the possibility that any historical subject *might* have been queer, then should we

not also be making the effort to see *all* historical images more queerly, regardless of what we think we know about the gender and/or sexuality of the artist who created them? We have everything to gain—including the rich archival and interpretive possibilities that come with the ambiguity and uncertainty of not knowing for sure, as well as the potential of entirely new readings of the widest array of historical materials. And, in my view, we have nothing to lose except our research cisheteronormativity.



Figure 8. Lemaire, *Les Fées*, 1908, oil on canvas, 60 × 42 in. Musées de Sens. Photograph © Musées de Sens/E. Berry.

6. Reading a Less Binary Life

While in the above examples, I focused on the potential for Lemaire’s work and biography to be read more queerly in sexual terms, I believe the same is true for gender. As I have pointed out, Lemaire was unlike the vast majority of her female-identified colleagues in publicly exhibiting salacious nudes that were neither Orientalist nor classicizing. She also actively avoided grouping herself among the ranks of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs (the Union of Women Painters and Sculptors) that emerged during her career. In a fantasy “Académie Féminine” (Academy of Women) voted on by the readers of *Femina* magazine in September 1902, Lemaire received second place (with 7825 votes, after first-place winner Sarah Bernhardt’s 8276). But a month later, in a follow-up article that interviewed the vote recipients, Lemaire dismissed the accolade by saying she had no idea what a women’s academy could even be.³⁴ Rather than join groupings of French women artists, Lemaire consistently allied herself with groups dominated by or exclusive to men. Similar choices by other artists have been attributed to a desire to avoid the hindrance of being a woman in a sexist field. It is clear that being called a “woman artist” automatically places one in a lesser category, not because women artists are in any way actually lesser, but because patriarchal art history has constructed the term “artist” as the unmarked masculine, making “woman artist” an automatically qualified term.³⁵ Might not Lemaire be one of those artists wise enough to hope to avoid the diminishment of the marked term? Absolutely. But might Lemaire just as plausibly *not* have thought of herself—or perhaps

themselves—as a woman, and therefore have avoided definitive gendered alignment to elude not sexism but even greater censure as insane, a tragic ‘invert’, or perverse?³⁶

Although Lemaire’s Euro-American fame as an artist was made in large part by paintings and illustrations of Parisian women and flowers, their work was not infrequently described in masculine terms. Lemaire’s formal painting professor, Charles Chaplin, reportedly said “All that she paints has a mustache!”³⁷ In his review of the Salon of 1877 in which Lemaire won an honorable mention, Henri Houssaye described them as “a vigorous colorist”, who portrayed a sexually available rather than delicate Manon Lescaut (Figure 9) with “virile boldness and frankness. One searches in vain for the hand of a woman in this robust painting”.³⁸ In his 1899 book of self-portraits and brief descriptions of the top artists of the time, Yveling Rambaud writes of Lemaire that “[t]he imitators came out of the ground; they copied without scruple, even slavishly, her manner and even the accessories accompanying her sheaves and her bouquets. Fruit, which she also painted, had the same happy fate. Since Chardin and Baptiste,³⁹ we have rarely seen such science and virtuosity”.⁴⁰ As art historians know well, thanks to the pioneering work of such colleagues as Norma Broude and Tamar Garb, for a nineteenth-century French critic to put an emphasis on Lemaire’s ability to link science and virtuosity in paintings of nature, which were then copied by others, was to put them in the camp of male-identified painters.⁴¹ Such masculine descriptions of women’s abilities were not unheard of, functioning as a way to maintain the fundamentally higher quality of work by men. But Houssaye’s description goes beyond the normal approach (“she’s so good, she paints like a man!”) to include a (questionable) sexualization of Lemaire’s subject as “délurée” (“cheeky”, “knowing”, or “loose”).⁴² Linkage of Lemaire’s virile hand to the representation of a “loose” woman subject is a combination we do not find as frequently in the cases that Broude and Garb have detailed so well for us. Is it possible that the more famous Lemaire of the later, more overtly sexualized nudes did not receive comment because they were seen by then more *as* a man, either artistically, in practice, or as a person? The French state showed its similar valuation of Lemaire as not-a-woman in February of 1898 when it bestowed on them the role of Professor of applied design in the study of plants at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle (the National Museum of Natural History), a role given exclusively to men, both before and after.⁴³



Figure 9. Lemaire, Manon, 1877, oil on canvas, 50.47 × 30.75 in. Private collection; Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madeleine_Lemaire_-_Lady_in_Red,_White,_and_Blue.jpg (accessed on 9 May 2024).

Unlike the generally complimentary implications of describing their artwork as masculine, Lemaire's physical appearance was often criticized by detractors as insufficiently feminine. Proust biographer Ghislain de Diesbach describes Lemaire as "tall and strong, somewhat virile in appearance . . . she was one of those women who, as they get older, end up resembling the man they lack".⁴⁴ One queer salon regular, Albert Flament, described Lemaire in comparison to another salon host this way: "But they differ by the hair that Mme Lemaire hastily adds to those that remain, before going down to dinner, the evening dress too hastily donned. . . the flesh of [a] woman who ha[s] given up their interest in forms for which men no longer show the delicate attentions of the past".⁴⁵ Flament is one of several contemporaries who described Lemaire as essentially in drag as a woman. For example, Matilda Gay described them as having "a sort of down on her face that is visible through her paint—like the first beard of a youth".⁴⁶ For many, the associated cracks in Lemaire's feminine presentation revealed the failure of the performance. François Proulx, in the essay quoted above, argued that the wordplay enacted by Colette (and Proulx himself) in remaking Lemaire as Lepaire corresponds with Lemaire's "reputation for gender non-conformity".⁴⁷ Proulx even speculates later in his essay that a Lemaire illustration for a Proust short story ("Mélancolique villégiature de Madame de Breyves" ("Mme de Breyves Melancholy Vacation"), Figure 10) could be a portrait of Proust in drag, *without* a mustache, as a sort of inside joke about their shared non-conformity to gender binaries.⁴⁸ Proulx sees the subject's heavy-lidded eyes as echoing Proust's, but I would point out that Lemaire had similarly lidded eyes, as well as the curly hair of the model (which Proust lacked). While I do not read that image itself as representing Proust (or Lemaire),⁴⁹ I agree with Proulx's conceptual move: Proust and Lemaire are indeed irregular kin, recognizable to each other as well as those around them as not quite normative. And, like Proulx, I see the illustrations Lemaire made for their protégé's first published book as successful in capturing their shared deviations from the gender norms of their time.⁵⁰ Unlike Proulx, however, whose focus is the gay lovers Proust and Hahn, I read Lemaire not (or not only) as a queer, 'ballys' *mother* raising queer children but as potentially genderqueer or non-binary.



Figure 10. Lemaire, *Mélancolique Villégiature de Madame de Breyves*. Engraving by Rougeron, Vignerot et cie. Published in Marcel Proust, *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1896, 97. Full text including illustrations available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/58698> (accessed on 9 May 2024).

7. Gendered Presentations

Lemaire the salon host played a crucial role in Proust's early forays into society, introducing him to some of the queer and gender non-conforming people he most idolized. Indeed, Lemaire was known even beyond Paris for their particular expertise in creating an

ideal salon environment for the presentation of otherwise unsanctioned personae. Even detractors had to admit, and regularly have, that Lemaire knew how to throw a party. Some of their costume balls were considered the best of the Belle Époque and were not just written up in the newspapers at the time but also mentioned by guests in their own memoirs years and decades later. In a commissioned essay on the topic in *Femina* magazine, Lemaire stated that “A costume ball offers an exception which partly removes the boundaries drawn between the various societies that share the life of Paris. It is a bit of neutral ground where in trading modern clothing [“l’habit moderne”] for a disguise, one easily agrees to put down for a moment its habits and prejudices. [...] In this matter fantasy and imagination are everything. . . .”⁵¹ While Lemaire seems to have worn the “modern habit” in daily public life, they also created thousands of opportunities for themselves and others to imagine a different life, a different self, and to play that out in the somewhat public setting of their famous studio/salon on the rue de Monceau in the 8th Arrondissement.

Lemaire would have had access to and experience with gender variance not just under the cover of play but in well-documented friendships with those who were challenging social norms in their daily lives, the most famous of which might be Sarah Bernhardt. Although she cisheteronormatively downplayed Bernhardt’s open romantic partnership with painter Louise Abbéma, Mary Louise Roberts has argued that Bernhardt’s dressing as a man was more than just trying on a role; rather, she was showing her tendency to parody rather than inhabit any normative identity, both off and on stage, “*stag*[ing] the culturally inscribed limits of gender identity rather than ‘naturally’ reproduc[ing] them”.⁵² Lemaire’s male-identified friends also toyed with gender binaries. Critic Jean Lorrain was known for wearing makeup in public and choosing feminine pen names (e.g., *Mimosa*) for essays in the popular press. Yet, he also slandered anyone he thought was too effeminate, for example, Robert de Montesquiou, who was legendarily the model for a wide variety of representations of effeminacy during his lifetime.⁵³ Lemaire launched the career of Félix Mayol, the most simultaneously popular and exceptionally (and deliberately) effeminate musical stage performer in French modern history; according to Maurice Chevalier, one of Mayol’s deathbed requests was for Chevalier to recover an original watercolor which Lemaire had gifted Mayol after a salon performance.⁵⁴ Whether wearing the clothing or make-up of a supposedly different gender, or taking on gestures and expressions that intimated the same variance, many of Lemaire’s closest friends and most frequent companions were open about, and even celebrated, gender non-normativity.

It is true that Lemaire never seems, as far as we know, to have dressed in masculine clothing or given themselves a name or pronoun that would suggest a preferred masculine or neutral identification, even though this was not unheard of for people assigned female at birth in late nineteenth-century Paris or Europe more broadly.⁵⁵ The photographs we have of Lemaire show recognizably feminine costume. Similarly, the letters and other written texts they generated never claim a masculine or neutral (or feminine) identity, and on more than one occasion, Lemaire was presented to the public by others precisely as a “woman artist” and did not correct those statements directly. However, an accurate portrayal of Madeleine Lemaire’s social and personal life can only be framed as a place where queer and gender non-conforming people were centered, not merely tolerated. I think Lemaire should be described as such in terms of gender as well as sexuality, again, not just despite but *precisely because of* the lack of strong evidence in any single direction. Because even though Lemaire lacks the overt signs of gender and sexual non-conformity that dozens of her friends and salon regulars displayed, this should not make the possibility of a non-binary Lemaire illegible or invisible to our histories.⁵⁶

Instead, I demand that the possibility that Lemaire might have been non-binary and queer be centered rather than elided. I want us to think of Lemaire as not a woman artist, not for the usual and legitimate reason of questioning the sexist separation of women artists from artists tout court, but because Lemaire may, in fact, not have been a cisgender woman. And the fact that we know that many people assigned the sex of female and/or the gender of woman at birth by those around them or by the overdetermined binaries of normative

Western modern culture and law are *not* women—people like myself—means we must maintain this possibility as a consideration. While the language of genderqueerness did not exist in Lemaire’s time, the language of a “third sex”, however variably and problematically applied, did.⁵⁷ And whichever terminology might or might not be apropos to the time, the *concept* we now have of non-binary gender is not unique to our time. Lemaire may have painted with a bit of the mustache and been described by friends as insufficiently feminine or importantly masculine, but they were not someone we can take a quick glance at and assume gender non-conformity. So why am I choosing to do so? Because where we do not know for sure, we must start at least acknowledging the possibility. In other words, we must stop assuming cisheteronormativity wherever we simply do not have evidence against it—and we cannot assume issues like a marriage certificate or publicly normative gender presentation are sufficient evidence. As historian Jen Manion puts it, “Records were never meant to provide information about illicit non-procreative sexualities. The fact that historians continue to argue that the absence of such evidence constitutes its nonexistence reveals the limits of historical method and the lie of objectivity”.⁵⁸ To assume that Lemaire is a woman artist is to assume a great many things we do not—and likely will never—know with any certainty. And yet, that is an assumption we constantly make, as literary scholar Gabrielle Bychowski has argued: “Most scholarship is, effectively, cisgender scholarship, not only because it is mostly cisgender scholars who have claimed the education and tools to publish it but also because most scholarship assumes the cisgender status of any character or historical figure who is presented to readers. [. . .] [However, n]either the text nor the person was necessarily cisgender until cisgender scribes, scholars, and readers marked them as such”.⁵⁹ The irony that I myself have made this move more often than not, given my own non-binary queer identity, is a sign of its entrenchment.

Cisnormative and heteronormative scholars, including some queer and trans scholars and allies, have argued that we must not read back from our own time period to those of the past—as if we could do otherwise—a demand that effectively, if sometimes implicitly, erases or limits the history of queer, trans, and gender-variant people. We must be able to understand Lemaire as well as their associates—a group whose art is said to have *defined* Belle Epoque Paris—as an emphatically queer and trans group, composed of people who had sexual or romantic relationships with people of various gender identities, and whose own gender identities were often either openly disputed or not encapsulated by the normative binaries we keep insisting, despite so much evidence to the contrary, were so prevalent in their time.

A glance at my citations shows that queer and trans theorists have called for these moves for years, and their research confirms that, contrary to popular media, non-cisgender humans are not a contemporary invention. We also all surely recognize the canonical problem of focusing on only the most “obvious” representatives of any identity matrix in further analyzing its role in our histories. While I absolutely value the scholarly insistences that certain figures who have spoken, written, and publicly claimed what we now call queer or trans identities were indeed queer or trans (according to whatever terminology or ontology was relevant in their own place and time), I do not think we can stop with the most obvious and thereby tokenized exceptions that prove the normative rule, because this will leave those whose archive is more illegible forever outside the realm of possibility of gender and sexual variance, requiring an interpretive flexibility or imaginativeness that we use supposed historical rigor as a reason to avoid.⁶⁰ David Getsy puts it thusly: “For a queer history, the archive remains a compromised necessity and, always, a site of continuing struggle against effacement. Any wish for purity from it—unsullied by such attachments—is the willful turning of a blind eye”.⁶¹ And yet, especially in terms of gender variance, we art historians are still most definitely stuck in that wish for purity, particularly in studying art before 1930. We need, instead, what Scott Larson calls critical trans-attendance: attending to alternate frameworks and articulations of power that allow us to see not just those who might be trans, but the ways we are continuing, regardless of our own positionalities, to see with cisheteronormative lenses.⁶² What if our scholarly

status quo was instead non-binary—if we *started*, paraphrasing Marsquis Bey, Stephanie Clare, Finn Enke, Mat Fournier, Emma Heaney, Kit Heyam, Greta LaFleur, Sharon Marcus, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Sarah Tobias, Quin Miller, Robert Mills, Fred Moten, Derek Conrad Murray, Jordan Reznick, Gayle Salamon, J. Logan Smilges, Susan Stryker, and Mary Weismantel et al., with radical doubt and an openness to any possibility including an unclear, even unknowable one?

8. Building a Better Art History

Those who talk about Lemaire often describe them as differently gendered—as not conforming to the binary standards of gender operating in that time as normative. I choose to take those complexly gendered descriptions seriously, particularly coming as they do from a time in which this conversation was fully live, and not marginal or novel as we keep falsely suggesting. Rather than simply talking about Lemaire as a good painter (because their paintings were characterized as masculine), a bad woman (because they were not feminine enough), or a bad painter (because their art was too feminine or not feminine enough), might we not consider Lemaire the non-binary, Lemaire the gender fluid, Lemaire the queer? If Proust and Colette, who both wrote at length about gender and sexual non-conformity, gave Lemaire a gendered twist in their writing, we might take them at their word and do the same. These moves are happening more quickly and pervasively in other disciplines, despite the work of our own important pioneers. It is time we art historians learned to see our own archives, subjects, and artworks in all their possibility rather than assuming that we already know precisely what they show. By questioning the epistemological foundations of art and its histories and methods—rather than simply accepting what most of us have been taught—I think we can build a better art history. Abandoning our cisheteronormative approaches is one necessary step in that direction.

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Notes

- ¹ Lemaire was only the third French woman artist to receive the Legion of Honor (after Rosa Bonheur and Virginie Demont-Breton); details can be found on the Base de données Léonore, the Legion of Honor database, among the Archives Nationales online resources: <https://www.leonore.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/ui/notice/228500> (accessed on 9 May 2024). Lemaire's appointment at the Muséum national and awarding of the Legion of Honor resulted in many feature articles in the popular and arts presses; see, for instance, (Frappa 1906, p. 119) and (Sergines 1906, p. 119). Lemaire appears in hundreds of reference texts (and briefly in a good number of historical and literary studies), but the only full-length, published biographical study of her is (Uro 2015).
- ² As obscure a source as Milwaukee's *Yenowine's Illustrated News* of 25 June 1893 published a feature of Lemaire under the heading "The Greatest Woman Artist" (Anonymous 1893), in which she is described as "perhaps the best known water colorist in Europe. . . said to make a larger income than any other female artist in the world". In *Femina: Publication Bi-Mensuelle Illustrée*, 15 May 1901 (Femina 1901) a front page photograph caption about Lemaire included the statement, "Il n'est pas besoin de présenter Mme Lemaire, l'une des femmes artistes le plus universellement appréciées" (There is no need to introduce Madame Lemaire, one of the women artists most universally appreciated).
- ³ (Véron 1882, pp. 50–51; Warnod 1928, p. 2).
- ⁴ For example, (Chaleyssin 1992; Jullian 1967, p. 146).
- ⁵ The idea that Lemaire was Dumas fils' mistress is repeated occasionally throughout the years without source citation, morphing as recently as 2005 into this ridiculous version: "A hopelessly mediocre talent who fancied herself a still-life painter, Mme Lemaire was a big woman with a highly rouged face and coarse features who boasted that she once had been the mistress of Alexandre

Dumas, père. She turned out canvas after canvas of nauseating lilies and roses, rumored to fetch up to five hundred francs apiece. ‘Only God has created more of them’, observed Alexandre Dumas, fils” (emphasis mine, Hansen 2005).

6 The strengths and weaknesses of this practice are thoroughly analyzed in feminist art histories of the last 60 years, most notably in those authored by Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin, and Mary Sheriff. I have also discussed it in my own work, including (Ringelberg 2017).

7 There has been substantial recent work challenging specifically cisheteronormative scholarly lenses in art history and visual culture, particularly in the contemporary period; see, for instance, (Getsy and Gossett 2021; Metzger and Ringelberg 2020); for early 20th century work, (Reznick 2022) is particularly strong. Examples of art historical scholarship challenging cisheteronormative assumptions before the 20th century include (Smalls 1996; Rand 1994; Davis 1994; Broude 2002; Getsy 2022; Lord and Meyer 2019).

8 Proulx (2015). “Willy” is the pseudonym of Henry Gauthier-Villars (1859–1931), Colette’s first husband.

9 Lemaire’s relationship with the life and work of Marcel Proust has been the primary source of information about her since her death. Lemaire illustrated Proust’s first book, (Proust 1896); see (Eells and Dezon-Jones 2022). Lemaire also features prominently in the society-focused phase of Proust’s biography throughout the 1890s and early 1900s.

10 See, for example, (Dorf 2007; Carter 2006; Jullian 1967; Maurois 1981).

11 Lemaire’s social events were covered frequently in the general and popular press; Proust used his familiarity with Lemaire’s celebrated salon to advance his own career as a writer for *Le Figaro* in the feature *Dominique* (pseud.) (Proust 1903). There, he wrote “... d’une personne étrangement puissante en effet, aussi célèbre au delà des mers qu’à Paris même, dont le nom signé au bas d’une aquarelle, comme imprimé sur une carte d’invitation, rend l’aquarelle plus recherché que celle d’aucun autre peintre et l’invitation plus précieuse que celle d’aucune autre maîtresse de maison: j’ai nommé Madeleine Lemaire”. An incredibly detailed and useful diary that features hundreds of entries on Lemaire’s salon and other social events from 1894 to 1927 is (Saint-Marceaux 2007).

12 For more on how Lemaire’s flower paintings might connect with her queer space-making, see (Ringelberg 2018).

13 Proust, “*La Cour aux Lilas*”. See, for example, <https://www.artrenewal.org/artists/madeleine-jeanne-lemaire/1101> (accessed on 9 May 2024) or https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings_by_Madeleine_Lemaire (accessed on 9 May 2024).

14 Lynda Nead provides an excellent feminist consideration of the stakes of the gendered representation of the so-called female nude and how it is analyzed and understood in art history in (Nead 1992). This book was a much-needed riposte to the more commonly cited work by (K. Clark 1956) as well as the many well-intended texts that followed in its wake. Citing extant critiques by feminist art historians Marcia Pointon and Carol Duncan, Nead addresses the constant re-articulation of both the processes and outcomes of painting nude women’s bodies as highly sexualized in an explicitly patriarchal, cisheteronormative (although she does not use that word) context, and references Lemaire’s contemporaries Renoir and Kandinsky as supporting this view (p. 56).

15 These are described as such in Hoschedé’s review of that year: “bonne académie rehaussée par d’éclatants bouquets de pivoines d’une très belle coloration”/good académie enhanced by bright bouquets of peonies of a very beautiful coloration) in (Lobstein 2008).

16 Sotheby provides the *Sommeil de Manon* title with confidence for two nearly identical paintings, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/tableaux-sculptures-dessins-anciens-xix-siecle-pf1609/lot.150.html> (accessed on 9 May 2024) (Figure 5) and <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/tableaux-dessins-anciens-19-siecle-pf1509/lot.146.html> (accessed on 9 May 2024), dating them to 1906 and 1909, respectively. While it is true that Lemaire exhibited a work with that title at the Salon Nationale des Beaux-Arts in those years, I have not located any verifiable rationale for the respective dating of each version or that the “second” work might in fact have been given a different title, such as *La Dame aux Perles* (exhibited in 1910, oil on canvas, current whereabouts unknown) or *Ivresse* (1913, oil on canvas, current whereabouts unknown).

17 Gervex’s painting (oil on canvas, 69.37 × 87.13 in) is in the collection of the Musée d’Orsay: <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/rolla-80034> (accessed on 9 May 2024).

18 See (Clayson 2003). Hunter (2016) argues for a reconsideration of Gervex and painters like him, which would include Lemaire, who have been neglected in favor of the avant-gardist canon.

19 Clayson (2003) pp. 83–90.

20 See, respectively, (Lobstein 2008, pp. 150 and 201; Saint Vallery 1890; Wolff 1890).

21 See (T. Clark 1985; Faunce and Nochlin 1998).

22 Nead points out that T.J. Clark simply assumes this to be the case in addressing Manet’s *Olympia*. For more on Clark’s unquestioned assumptions, see (Molotiu 2018; Getsy 2022). On heterosexuality’s construction, see (Katz 2007). I recommend the 2007 edition because of the useful new preface by Katz and afterword by Lisa Duggan.

23 A rare exception to the art historical silence over female nudes created by desirous women is (Mason 2007, 2014).

24 See, for example, (Sondergaard and Mairey 2006; Garb 1993; Pollock 1999).

25 An interesting exception is (Nochlin 1999). Nochlin argues that rather than displacement in Cassatt’s nude babies’ bodies, “one cannot rule out the presence of desire” (p. 202).

- 26 Latimer (2005), pp. 9–10.
- 27 “Mais madame Madeleine Lemaire n’entendait pas renoncer au grand tableau et elle nous revient avec deux œuvres, le Sommeil et une Ophélie charmante, dont nos lecteurs peuvent apprécier la grâce par notre reproduction”. Wolff (1890), p. 85.
- 28 An excellent version of this argument for archaeologists can be found in (Weismantel 2012); and for museum professionals in Middleton (2020). For an accessible, broader history treading this ground, see (Heyam 2022).
- 29 The (re)current dangerous social discourse casting queer and trans people as “groomers” is an example of where this kind of thinking can lead—to violence both figurative and literal.
- 30 Halévy (1887), p. 96. There were several editions of this book by different publishers in French and English with Lemaire’s illustrations across the late 1880s into the 1890s.
- 31 Meredith (1897), p. 262.
- 32 The pattern here of blonde and brunette women as a queer couple was already established in the literature of the period, such as (Albert 2005); available in English as *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in art and literature of fin-de-siècle France*. Trans. Nancy Erber and William Peniston. (New York: Harrington Park Press 2016). Gretchen Schultz also documents this in (Schultz 2015).
- 33 «Le moulage de leurs mains enlacées, les multiples dessins, médaillons, tableaux que Louise consacrait à son amie, les tendres dédicaces de Sarah les avaient vite situées du côté de Lesbos. Elles ne faisaient rien pour démentir la rumeur publique et certains de leurs amis, aussi bien masculins que féminins, ne pouvaient que la confirmer». (“The cast of their entwined hands, the multiple drawings, medallions, paintings that Louise dedicated to her friend, Sarah’s tender dedications had quickly located them on the side of Lesbos. They did nothing to deny the public rumor and some of their friends, both men and women, could only confirm it”). (Gellini 2006, p. 77).
- 34 L’Heureux (1902), pp. 316–17. «Mme Madeleine Lemaire, qu’un de nos collaborateurs a vue dans son chalet de Dieppe, déclare qu’elle n’a aucune idée sur ce que pourrait être une Académie féminine. . . » (Madame Madeleine Lemaire, who one of our collaborators saw in her Dieppe chalet, says that she has no idea what a Woman’s Academy could be. . .”) The vote appears in *Femina* 39 (1 September 1902).
- 35 The foundational argument is given in (Nochlin 1971, pp. 480–510).
- 36 See (Murat 2006) for fuller detailing of the ways in which those who did not fit binary categories of sex or gender were pathologized and/or criminalized in the nineteenth century. Note that there were other Parisian celebrities who were public in their deviations from gender norms, for example, Jane Dieulafoy, Marc de Montifaud, and Rachilde. See (Mesch 2020).
- 37 «“Tout ce qu’elle peint a de la moustache!”», cited in (Uro 2004, p. 134). Uro follows the Chaplin quote by remarking that Lemaire continued in a mustachioed vein in life (“De la moustache, elle en a également dans la vie”). The same quote about the mustache is presented in Uro’s later revised book this way: “De toute évidence, l’homme de la maison, tout au moins sur le plan artistique, c’est plutôt Madeleine. Chaplin disait souvent: Tout ce qu’elle peint a de la moustache!, ce qui n’est pas une remarque très féministe” (To all evidence, the man of the house, at least artistically, is obviously Madeleine. Chaplin often said “Everything she paints has a mustache! which is not a very feminist remark”). (Uro 2015, p. 80).
- 38 Houssaye (1877), *Revue des deux mondes* (1 June 1877): p. 838. “Une vigoureuse coloriste, c’est Mme Madeleine Lemaire. La figure qui a pour titre Manon c’est le plus brillant ramage de couleurs vives, d’une densité éclatante, juxtaposées avec une hardiesse et une franchise toutes viriles. On chercherait en vain la main d’une femme dans cette peinture robuste. Cette fille haute en couleur, à l’allure décidée, aux yeux hardis, n’est pas la délicate Manon Lescaut du roman qui séduisit Des Grieux par «la douceur de ses regards et son air charmant de naïveté»; c’est la Manon «déluée» de la chanson des gardes-françaises, moitié grisette et moitié cantinière».
- 39 “Baptiste” is not further identified in the text but likely refers to Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer (French, 1636–1699). Thanks to Sarah Grandin for assistance with this attribution.
- 40 Yveling Rambaud (pseudonym of Frédéric Gilbert), «Madeleine Lemaire», *Silhouettes d’Artistes: avec portraits dessinés par eux-mêmes* (Rambaud 1899, p. 152). «Les imitateurs sortirent de dessous terre; on copia sans scrupule, servilement même, sa manière et jusqu’aux accessoires accompagnant ses gerbes et ses bouquets. Les fruits, qu’elle peignit aussi, eurent ce même heureux sort. Depuis Chardin et Baptiste, on vit rarement pareille science et autant de virtuosité».
- 41 See (Broude 1991; Garb 2007, pp. 190–201).
- 42 See endnote 37 for the full quotation.
- 43 The first, and only prior, woman painter affiliated with the museum, Madeleine-Françoise Basseporte, was “Painter to the King” from 1742 to 1774; the position shifted from a singular role during the ancien régime to several positions by Lemaire’s time, all of which were held by seemingly male-identified artists. For more on Lemaire’s role there, see the *Bulletin du Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle*, particularly No. 2 (1898), 45, and No. 3 (1906), 129. Also see (Bultingaire 1935, pp. 667–78), as well as the list of named chairs on page 32.
- 44 Diesbach (1991), p. 119.
- 45 Flament (1946), p. 157 (23 mai 1898). «Mais elles diffèrent par les cheveux que Mme Lemaire rajoute précipitamment, avant de descendre dîner, à ceux qui lui sont demeurés, la robe du soir trop hâtivement enfilée, le pivot artificiel d’un rose oriental ou le soleil de paillettes d’or plaqués au corsage. . . et, déjà, ce que l’âge vient charger de rides et dépouiller de saveurs, la chair dont

sont revêtues les femmes ayant renoncé à porter intérêt à des forms pour lesquelles les hommes ne témoignent plus les attentions délicates d'autrefois». I have reordered one of the phrases for clarity in English.

46 Cited in [Rieder \(2000\)](#), p. 172.

47 [Proulx \(2015\)](#), p. 246.

48 [Proulx \(2015\)](#), pp. 247–48.

49 Several other images from the book show this same model, and in those, she appears unlike either Proust or Lemaire; it also appears to be the same model in the widely exhibited oil painting *La Chute des feuilles* (1892). Lemaire's work from live models for book illustrations during this period is documented in [Ganderax \(1888\)](#), pp. 319–48. [Thiébaud-Sisson \(1894\)](#), pp. 529–40, noted that Lemaire was proprietary with and trained the models they used.

50 I have extended this argument beyond that single image elsewhere, for example, in "The Court of Lilacs, The Studio of Roses, The Garden at Réveillon: Madeleine Lemaire's Empire of Flowers".

51 [Lemaire \(1902\)](#), pp. 36–37. "Un bal costumé offert un caractère d'exception qui supprime en partie les frontières dressées entre les diverses sociétés qui se partagent la vie de Paris. C'est un peu un terrain neutre où en quittant l'habit moderne pour le déguisement, on consent sans peine à déposer pour un instant ses habitudes et ses préjugés". "En cette matière la fantaisie et l'imagination sont tout. . .".

52 [Roberts \(2011\)](#), pp. 60–61. Latimer in *Women Together/Women Apart* calls Roberts to task for ignoring the existence of lesbians in *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927*. Abbéma was regularly described as leaning masculine in her gender presentation; she also made it clear in memoirs and letters that she was in love with Bernhardt and considered her a life partner. For art historical treatments of the pair as a couple, see [Mason \(2007, 2014\)](#) as well as [Pollock \(2006\)](#); see also [Marcus \(2019\)](#) for a superb analysis of their "friendship".

53 Lorrain was openly gay, but his gender presentation was often described as non-normative within the expectations of the time even for gay men of his class. See ([Mosse 1998](#); [Carter 2006](#); [Schneider 2009](#)). Montesquiou was often described, like Lorrain, as a dandy, as well as, on occasion (but less insistently), as wearing makeup, but there is no verifiable discussion of his appearing in drag.

54 [Chevalier \(1948\)](#), pp. 76–78.

55 In addition to ([Heyam 2022](#); [Lejeune 1987](#); [Manion 2020](#); [Murat 2006](#); [Mesch 2020](#); [Proulx 2015](#)), see ([Bychowski et al. 2018](#); [De Vun and Tortorici 1991](#)). These two texts played a significant role in my own thinking around historicizing non-normative genders.

56 [Love \(2007\)](#), p. 8: "As queer readers we tend to see ourselves as reaching back toward isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them. It is hard to know what to do with texts that resist our advances". Lemaire might equally fit Naomi Schor's idea of the "bad object" ([Schor 1995](#)). Thanks to Jessica Tanner for suggesting the latter to me.

57 See ([Fournier 2022](#); [Herdt 1996](#); [Murat 2006](#)).

58 [Manion \(2020\)](#), p. 10. Of course, Susan Stryker has long carried this torch. See [Stryker \(2024\)](#) for essays from throughout her early career, as well as [Stryker \(2008\)](#).

59 [Bychowski \(2021\)](#), pp. 95–96; see also ([Bey 2023](#)).

60 Speaking of Georges Hérelle, Lejeune writes «Il a préféré garder le silence et rester libre. C'est la génération suivante qui, avec Gide, conquerra le droit à parole». ("He preferred to keep his silence and remain free. It is the following generation which, with Gide, would conquer the right to speak"); Lejeune, "Autobiographie et homosexualité en France au XIXe siècle", p. 89.

61 [Getsy \(2018\)](#). A particularly trenchant riposte to archival "purity" is given in [Snorton \(2017\)](#), and [Hartman \(2008\)](#) is required reading for any historian of the archivally obscured.

62 [Larson \(2021\)](#), pp. 350–65. This book in its entirety ([LaFleur et al. 2021](#)) informs my overall perspective deeply; growing challenges to cisnormativity can also be found from [Martínez-San Miguel and Tobias \(2016\)](#) to [Heaney \(2024\)](#).

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