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The Socioeconomic Significance of Maximilien Luce's *Morning, Interior 1890*

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After his first exhibition at the Salon des Artistes Indépendants in 1887, Maximilien Luce's *Man Washing* (fig. 1) stood out to several notable viewers. Felix Fénéon, an advocate for Neo-Impressionism and a friend of Luce, described the artist as, "brutal and honest with unpolished, muscular talent." Other viewers used words like intense, original, and crude to describe his artistic aura.¹ The following paper focuses on his 1890 work, *Morning, Interior* (fig. 2), and his developing narrative of the artisanal man. Using the painting as a platform for discussion, we delve into his technical prominence and political ideals. Luce's individual authenticity is an intriguing, often overlooked point of discussion. His 1884 *The Shoemaker, the Two Givort Brothers* (fig. 3), an example of traditional brushwork, lacks the radical, politically charged element of his later pointillist works. His interest in the working man appeared consistently throughout his artistic career, but his mastery of pointillism makes works like *Morning, Interior* arguably more profound. With an understanding of the Neo-Impressionist movement, nineteenth century political ideals, and a thorough formal analysis, the significance of *Morning, Interior* becomes clear.

Because the scene is obviously a depiction of daily life, "genre" is the immediate label we associate with the work. However, I would argue, that because of his familiarity with the subject and his interest in the artisanal male, Luce is successfully painting a rich portrait of a friend and a societal role. Recent scholarship on gender roles in portraiture provides a context for this argument. The collaborative authors of *Interior Portraiture*

1. Ferretti Bocquillon, Marina and Dardel, Aline and Lecomte, Vanessa and Tillier, Bertrand. *Maximilien Luce: Neo-Impressionist Retrospective*. Musée des impressionnismes Giverny. 2010.

and *Masculine Identity in France, 1789-1914* state the complexity of understanding male identity in a wider social context by asking, “If male identity - any person’s identity for that matter - results from a complex combination of biological, psychoanalytic, social, political and economic realities, all of which are constantly shifting, then how can scholars ever hope to understand them?”² Inclusion of this recent scholarship creates an intriguing context about the similarities between portraiture and genre paintings in the nineteenth century.³ By blurring the line between genre and portraiture, Luce confronts us with modern masculinity and evolving political thought.

Morning, Interior, a narrative-based composition, acts as a window into a man’s routine at daybreak. Viewers can easily imagine themselves in a similar position as the figure depicted; readying for the day, surrounded by utilitarian objects suggesting seemingly mundane acts of humanity. The soft light radiating from the intimate scene conveys a sense of delicacy. The artist endows the viewer with the privileged opportunity of viewing a man’s private routine; a man Luce considers important. Our eyes focus on the act of him dressing in what is typically associated with work attire. The artisanal male, a recurring subject in Luce’s depictions, became a lifestyle he felt passionate and possibly sentimental toward. *Man Washing* from 1887 and *Coffee* (fig. 4) from 1891 possess outward similarities to *Morning, Interior* because they depict working class men performing habitual acts of their day. Rather than acting as faceless lenses for the French working class, Luce chose, often for multiple sittings, subjects that he knew and interacted with on a regular basis. Eugène Givort, pictured in *Man Washing*, and Legaret, pictured in *Footbath*, both actively participated in the French workplace as shoemakers.⁴

Morning, Interior, the primary work at hand, features the

2. Temma Balducci, Heather Belnap Jensen, Pamela J. Warner, *Interior Portraiture and Masculine Identity in France, 1789-1914*, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2011.

3. Balducci: “One should also keep in mind that one of the particularities of nineteenth-century portraiture has been described as a blurring of the boundaries between the categories of portraiture and genre painting.”

4. Robyn Roslak, *Neo-impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape*, Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2007.

architectural gilder, Gustave Perrot. All three works portray working-class men conducting daily activities in private spaces. Luce creates individual narratives that intrinsically connect to each other based on the subjects and their surroundings.⁵ Jan Steen's 1665 *Morning Toilet* depicts a female in a strikingly similar scene as Luce's *Morning, Interior*. From their stature, gaze, action, and surroundings, the subjects of Luce and Steen's works are a fascinating juxtaposition to consider. Because this particular theme often centered around a female, what are Luce's intentions regarding gender identity? A significant compare and contrast of femininity and masculinity exceeds the scope of this paper. However, the idea of Luce feminizing his subjects is a valid subject to keep in mind, especially when juxtaposed with works like Steen's.

Much of late nineteenth century French art acted as a visual response to the changing tide of modernity, cultural shifts, and the progression of human thought. Along with industrialization came a new set of political, social, and creative ideals. As Karl Marx, Auguste Comte, and Sigmund Freud developed new socialist, positivist, and psychological thought,⁶ artists like Luce responded to industrialization by carefully choosing subject matter that would suggest their profound political stance. "Progress," a word transcending scientific, political, historical, and artistic disciplines, found its origins in socialist ideals.⁷ Artistic experimentation acted as a platform for reacting to the astronomical changes taking place. Many artists challenged the confines of classicism by introducing avant-garde subject matter to their canvases. In the 1849-50 work, *A Burial at Ornans* (fig. 5), Gustave Courbet deliberately chose to paint a historical scene that lacked noble subjects. Because it remains a significant point

5. Ibid.

6. Tuffelli: "At the end of the century approached, although more and more people were able to enjoy the benefits of an industrialized society, the mechanized world began to seem increasingly troubling. At the same time as faster means of communication and colonial expansion were 'opening up' the world, the beginnings of a need to turn in on oneself began to be felt. Some artists used symbolism to express their concerns and confusion."

7. Tuffelli: "Individual's therefore had a role to play in our common history, a history that concerned the progress of mankind. This notion of progress is a socialist ideal of a better world for everyone."

of discussion for modern art, Courbet's decision contributed to the broader motivation to expand the art world's expectations of subject matter. Artists like Courbet, Luce, and Paul Signac took a stand against the classic subject matter haunting the halls of the Salon and broke new ground for every artist that followed.

While Luce's primary works were explorations of the pointillist technique, he possessed a background in printmaking and illustration as well. Beginning in the 1870s, he worked as a printmaker with Eugène Froment and later with Auguste Lancon. His work experience introduced him to the natural instability of artistic professions and the way they were impacted by economic and societal changes. The introduction of zinc-based photographic prints began eliminating the need for hand-cut illustrations from printmaking shops like Froment and Lancon. As a trained craftsman, unprecedented technological progress meant growing accustomed to an unpredictable job market with little financial backing. With the growth of industrialization and a mass-produced mentality, artisans were unable to find significant stability in handicrafts. Previous scholarship suggests that working as a printmaker and knowing other artists greatly influenced his approach to subject matter as his career progressed toward full-time painting.⁸ Printmaking continued to serve a purpose in his artistic development as he contributed various illustrations to radical, political publications.⁹ He was not a shoemaker or an architectural gilder, but he could empathize with their taxing, creative professions.

Traditionalists that solely associated art with established ideals of the Salon would have found pointillism to be an astounding approach to brushwork. They may have argued against the methodical characteristic of pointillism, but Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, Camillo Pissarro, and Luce all applied paint to canvas

8. Roslak: "By the time Luce took up painting seriously later that year, he therefore was quite familiar with the effort it took to survive as a fine craftsman in an increasingly mass marketplace."

9. Annemarie Springer, "Terrorism and Anarchy: Late 19th-century Images of a Political Phenomenon in France," *Art Journal* 38, Issue 1, p261 (Jun., 1979), <http://bit.ly/14xMnNu> (accessed April 13, 2013).

in distinctly different ways.¹⁰ Unlike the figures in Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon at La Grande Jatte* (fig. 6) or Angrand's *Couple in the Street* (fig. 7), Luce renders the human form not only with anatomical precision, but also in a way that highlights the specificity of an individual's features. His particular formal considerations were uncommon among pointillist colleagues which is apparent in the previously mentioned works.¹¹ By building intricate compositions around his peers, he subtly declares that they are important enough to grace his own canvas and the larger context of the art community. He finds them to be such profound artisans that he pays homage not only by using them as subjects, but also by executing an avant-garde technique that is a product of Luce's own labor. This sheds light on his personal associations with craftsmanship, his background in printmaking, and his knowledge of other art-making techniques.

The political ideals of nineteenth century Anarchism encouraged the need to deeply understand artisanal culture, the necessity of handmade goods, and social politics. Individuals adhering to such ideals desired economic stability for craftsmen and despised bourgeois supremacy. The introduction of the department store threatened the integrity of Parisian culture by eliminating the need for well-crafted goods. Artisans that were accustomed to making products from start to finish were now forced to participate in one phase of production, and frequently the skilled were undistinguished from the unskilled. Anarchist thought reached a peak during this time in Paris. Artists and writers like Luce and Fénéon purposefully intertwined their work with their political allegiances. Being weary of the growing class distinctions between wealthy and poor led individuals to actively participate in radical declarations of their opinions. While not pertinent to understanding his work, Luce spent a small amount of time in prison during the historical event known as "The Trial of the Thirty." For Luce, being an artist meant utilizing technical skill, exploring innovative approaches, and conveying a viewpoint.

10. Albert Skira, *History of Modern Painting: From Baudelaire to Bonnard*, 2nd Edition. Switzerland, 1949. See pages 51-71.

11. Roslak: "There are few other instances in the history of neo-impressionism when the divided touch was used so fluidly to define the human form."

He viewed his vocation as an opportunity to express the value and importance of fellow artisans; their contributions to Parisian culture and lack of respect in bourgeois society.

Paul Signac, a fellow Neo-Impressionist, proudly proclaimed his dedication to anarchist ideals in the popular publication *La Révolte*. Acquainting himself closely with Maximilien Luce, Félix Fénéon, and Camillo Pisarro, Signac became a respected follower of both movements. Manufactured goods made artisanal labor obsolete and artists such as Luce and Signac let their choice of subject matter become a reflection of the societal issues they wanted to address. In Signac's *La Révolte* article, he consistently suggests that making art is directly linked to political activism.¹² Luce's 1892 *Coffee* (fig. 4), a work that Signac eventually owned, acted as a response to Signac's earlier 1888 work, *Parisian Sunday* (fig. 8), which playfully reacts to bourgeois stereotypes.¹³ The evidence lies in how the corresponding artists positioned their subjects in a nearly identical fashion. Signac's couple enjoys a luxuriant, carefree morning while Luce's couple labors over routine tasks. *Coffee* is strikingly similar to *Morning, Interior* in both technique and concept. The similarities extend beyond repetition of an artisanal focal point. The male is slumped over a morning task, leaning toward his left without making direct eye contact with the viewer. Luce's color palette is rich with delicate tones that suggest a morning glow, but also force the viewer to recognize the simplicity and utter plainness of his home. Again, similar to the figure in *Morning, Interior*, utilitarian objects are placed neatly throughout the composition. What we know about the artisan figure's background suggests that the artwork in the left, top quadrant is a nod to craftsmanship, both of the seated figure, and of Luce. As stated

12. Roslak Article: "But the article's most insistent claim was that art and art-making were forms of political activism. Artists who are 'revolutionaries by temperament', Signac wrote, and 'paint what they see, as they feel it...deal a solid blow of the pick to the old social edifice.' His words suggest that evidence for his anarchist beliefs should be sought not only in the example of his friendships and his intellectual life, but also his work." See other Roslak citation. Signac quotes: Un Impressionniste camarade [Paul Signac], 'Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires'.

13. Robyn Roslak, "Artisans, Consumers and Corporeality in Signac's Parisian Interiors," *Art History*, Vol. 29 Issue 5 (Nov. 2006), p. 860-886.

earlier, his technical execution of the human form was a rarity in the body of Neo-Impressionist work. His technique suggests the importance of expressing an idea, a task, a moment, and the intricacies of the figure.

The idea of including social politics and scientific innovation in art is clear in many works from Neo-Impressionist and Modern periods. As gender roles, political ideals and industrialization experienced a combination of gradual and rapid change, artists inevitably began expressing their passionate responses in the form of visual art. Artists as different as Pablo Picasso and Jacques Louis David are considered predecessors of “socially useful art.” As a designated founder of French socialism, Saint-Simon was the catalyst for the later developments of Karl Marx and other political theorists. As a passionate advocate for his philosophical developments, he believed in the interconnectedness of arts and sciences.¹⁴ With words occasionally veering into anarchism, he would have undoubtedly commented on the select few artists that adhered to Neo-Impressionism and radical politics. Luce, an underestimated master of pointillism, left nineteenth century France with a robust body of work exhibiting the social conscious that threaded art, science, and politics together in nineteenth century France.

Deeply analyzing *Morning, Interior* creates a frame for understanding the significance of Luce’s work within the Neo-Impressionist grouping. His brushstrokes grace the canvas with a grainy appearance, altering slightly depending on the distance of the viewer from the work. Despite the distinct interactions between light and shadow, the dotted technique gives the image consistency characteristic of other pointillist artists. Similar to Impressionist paintings, our first glance seems hazy and almost blurry. However, form is ultimately constructed with a regimented, systematic stroke that mirrors the figure’s methodical routine and utilitarian surroundings. With a distinct combination of light and dark hues, we sense the unmistakable sunrise glow Luce is painting. By varying the pressure and movement of his brushstroke, every

14. Donald D. Egbert, “The Idea of Avant-Garde in Art and Politics,” *Leonardo* 3, no. 1 (Jan., 1970), <http://bit.ly/YXXYIL> (accessed April 10, 2013).

dotted mark seems to have a purpose next to differing tones and colors. Not a single mark on the canvas is accidental or haphazard. After following the sunlight from the top right to the bottom left, our eye immediately skids across the figure's shoulders, down the folds of his clothing, and into the bottom right quadrant. The organized application of paint exhibits the artist's technical ability and tested patience. He builds the composition from one of the tiniest components possible: a dotted mark. This technique gives the piece an implied texture from corner to corner. The visual fuzziness initially jars our eyes into thinking we can scan over objects, but as soon as we mentally and physically look closer, there is a significant amount of detail. By playing with shadow as much as light, the work exudes a richness that it might lack if Luce chose a different time of day to depict. The systematic placement of each mark, each object, and each hue shows the dedication Luce feels in sharing this man's life with viewers.

A variety of framed and unframed objects hang on the surrounding walls, beckoning further attention. Based on the skylight window in the top, right quadrant, we can assume the bedroom is located in the uppermost, least expensive level of the building. Knowledge of the room's location shapes the viewer's perception of the subject's belongings. Perhaps what draws us to the hanging objects is the specificity of their form and how the sunlight and its shadows dance amongst them. Their exact purpose is difficult to determine, but their unrecognizable characteristics only deepen our curiosity. Considering the vases, cloths, and brushes scattered on the table and floor, everything seems to have a utilitarian purpose. While the hanging objects and artworks are not necessary like the floor objects, they provide decoration at the most basic level. While upper class apartments like the one depicted in Signac's *Parisian Sunday* were adorned with richly colored fabrics and patterns, the abodes in Luce's works possess nothing of the sort. Based on the manner in which the figure adorns himself and his bedroom, we can assume that he conducts a systematic, efficient life both at work and home. While their living spaces may not be impressive to a wealthier French citizen, the men in Luce's paintings have an experienced understanding of aesthetics

that infiltrates home in addition to their respective workshops.¹⁵ Recognizing the minute details of Luce's painting fleshes out the narrative of artisanal men, their work, and their appreciation of craftsmanship. The sparse living space in *Morning, Interior* lacks any overt suggestions of wealth or nobility. The figure's concentrated gaze draws attention to the mundanity of the moment. We follow the implied line of his contorted body, examining his well-word garb along the way. Certain paintings of the Impressionists cause us to consider that Luce's interior works were politically charged reactions to their depictions of bourgeois males.¹⁶ Genre scenes depicting the working class were not a groundbreaking feat in 1890,¹⁷ but his manipulation of the human form and narrative development situates Luce at a high level of authenticity within the Neo-Impressionist movement.

An unsung hero of Neo-Impressionism and individuality, Maximilien Luce left art history with a body of work exuding technical and political significance. By visually reacting to bourgeois society, he was able to explore artisanal men at a time when their personal and work lives changed significantly. Scholarship skirts over his artistry which is difficult to justify because his pointillist executions are in a league of their own. His renderings of working craftsmen was a decision that set him apart from every other Neo-Impressionist in France. The downtrodden men of the Luce works discussed, convey a certain weariness and complacency that reflect societal changes of the time period. The works are a true exhibition of his immense talent and dedication to social justice. Bold explorations of artisanal culture contribute

15. Roslak: "But those rooms could hardly be called empty, either, and their contents, including small works of art, are neatly and carefully arranged so that the modest artisanal lifestyle (which Luce records with such clarity in his precise and even treatment of objects and surfaces) also appears to be infused with a sense of quite pride and a desire for aesthetic pleasure."

16. Roslak: "In several ways, these paintings are radical answers to the plethora of impressionist canvases representing prosperous middle-class gentlemen idly at home in beautifully appointed rooms, either alone or with female companions."

17. Balducci: "As genre subjects came to replace history painting in the course of the nineteenth century, scenes of domestic interiors increasingly dominated the production of both avant-garde and more traditional artists." See Footnote 6 for full citation.

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greatly to our understanding of the shifting tides of late nineteenth century France. Without situating himself among such radical vehicles as the Neo-Impressionists and Anarchists, his work would lack the prominence discussed. Although much of the scholarship surrounding this movement chooses to include Luce as an afterthought, his work deserves careful formal and conceptual analysis. Once a viewer is presented with a work like *Morning, Interior*, entranced fascination is guaranteed to ensue.

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Figures



Figure 1. Luce, Maximilien. *Man Washing*, oil on canvas, 1887.



Figure 2: Luce, Maximilien. *Morning, Interior*, oil on canvas, 1890.



Figure 4: Luce, Maximilien. *Coffee*, oil on canvas, 1892.



Figure 4: Luce, Maximilien. *The Shoemaker, the Two Givort Brothers*, oil on canvas, 1884.



Figure 5: Courbet, Gustave. *A Burial at Ornans*, oil on canvas, 1849-50.



Figure 6: Seurat, Georges. *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, oil on canvas, 1884-86.



Figure 7: Angrand, Charles. *Couple in the Street*, oil on canvas, 1887.



Figure 8: Signac, Paul. *Parisian Sunday*, oil on canvas, 1888.



Figure 9: Steen, Jan. *Morning Toilet*, oil on canvas, 1665