

Review of journal article by Ruth E. Iskin: “Selling, Seduction,
and Soliciting the Eye: Manet’s *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*”

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Review

The barmaid, the man at the counter, and the mirror have previously received most of the attention of art historians of Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. Ruth E. Iskin believed it was important to also include other elements in the painting—that of the crowd and the items on the counter, if we were to fully understand the source of the elements for symbolism and meaning in the painting. Her journal article, "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*," successfully argues that these additional features help us to understand how meaning was developed in the symbols. Three words in her title—selling, seduction and soliciting—give us an idea of how these symbols manifest in the painting. The three main points of the article that show why the contents on the bar counter and the crowd are important to the development of meaning in the painting are the phenomenon of mass consumption, the changing roles of women, and the development of the public in the form of the modern crowd (Iskin 25).

Iskin wrote that to understand the process of developing meaning, we need to expand beyond the simple idea of having pleasure at a bar, and consider that mass consumption was very common in Paris by 1882. The very concept of modernity among Impressionist painters like Manet was intertwined with the mass public having more to consume in many product categories. The consumer revolution in France took place roughly between 1850 and the first World War. No longer was a local market the only place to get goods. New shops were present all over town. Consumers themselves thought that almost anything could be for sale. Inside

stores, there were many things for sale behind the counter, with women often being behind the counter. Sales girls had to look nice for the customers. Shop owners realized that more sales were likely if the girl behind the counter looked nice. The symbolism of the counter can be understood in light of the consumer revolution in that people weren't just eating at home and consuming minimally. Rather they were out shopping, and counters were a part of what was likely to be seen in stores, restaurants and bars. The counter was symbolic of the gap or difference between the consumer and the seller.

Besides often having counters inside, many store fronts often included enclosed windowed areas that displayed samples of products. These presentations of goods were positioned to solicit the eye of the potential customer. The mirror and the barmaid in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (Fig. 1) seemed to offer a similar perspective as a shop window, by reflecting or presenting available goods.

Iskin wrote that “contemporary commentators (in the mid- to late-1800s) were fully aware of the manipulation of commercial displays” (29). Placement of items was important to lure the customer and tempt the eye. This technique replaced the old style of



Fig. 1: Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*

selling with a new style of touch, then buy. It was recognized that a customer was more likely to buy if they were close to and could touch an item.

The products on the bar in Manet's painting were surely placed as such so that, even though the customer wouldn't necessarily touch them, they were visually within reach to

encourage desire. Also, as mentioned before, conspicuous product placement plus attractive women equaled sales. Incidentally, Manet placed his signature and the year 1882 on one of the bottles on the counter, signifying that his product (the painting) was also a commodity for sale. Before the consumer revolution, art had typically been commissioned, not sold after it was finished as a commodity. But art exhibits began not only to display art, but to provide art for purchase. This gave the consumer more art choices.

Commodities and various items for sale signified consumption, which reflected the increase of disposable income of the middle class. In the painting, the man at the bar has surely been enticed, and is ready to “consume.” He is dressed nicely and has an appearance of success. Some art historians suppose he is propositioning the barmaid, but with her neutral demeanor, it is difficult to determine if she is interested.

Fruits and roses, often represented in still-life paintings, adorn the bar counter as decorations, and are part of a set of visual and subliminal codes meant to entice. Similar supplemental items were also placed in store windows to enhance sales, lending a comfortable air of domesticity.

Mention is made by Iskin about the various “gazes” in the painting. Traditionally, women averted their eyes as a sign of modesty. But in the age of consumerism, women often directed their gazes to facilitate “sales.” Various advertisements at the time showed women browsing various products for sale, proving that they too, could not just be the subject of men’s amorous gazes, but could also gaze themselves. Women were both behind the counters, and in front of them, symbolizing both consumerism in general, and women’s increased independence in particular.

Around 1867, the number of women patrons at the Folies-Bergère music hall was minimal. But by 1882 they were a decidedly viable target market. There was the new concept of women as spectators. One woman in the bar uses opera glasses to look or gaze at something or someone, not only extending her gaze in a literal sense, but extending her independence in a broader sense of the expanding social norm of women mingling in public. The barmaid herself in Manet's painting has a gaze, but it is not a seductive gaze as a courtesan would exhibit.

While crowd members of an entertainment-related venue (e.g., theater) would have a predominantly focused gaze on the stage, crowd members in a bar have no such single focal point. Their focal points are numerous and scattered. Their predominant reason for gathering is merriment; they were consumers of "urban pleasures and spectacle" (Iskin 39).

With a crowd such as in the bar in the painting, there are a multiplicity of gazes in various directions, what Iskin referred to as spatial incoherence (41). Another form of spatial incoherence is the reflection of the mirror itself. It is difficult to understand how the mirror reflects the barmaid and her patron, especially since the bar counter and the reflected wall of the seating area immediately behind the barmaid appears to be parallel to the picture plane. Iskin suggested that the reflection represents the gaze of someone else, perhaps a female, so it is a *representational* reflection of a patron's *actual* reflection. We see the barmaid straight in front of us, but someone else sees her at an angle to the picture plane. The odd reflection is representative of women and men intermingling socially as part of a crowd. That odd mirror reflection thereby reflects *our* own gaze as part of the crowd. Regardless of the apparent inconsistent reflections, it is possible that Manet may have *wanted* his painting to be provocative to give him a better chance at commercial success with its sale.

In summary, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* has representational symbols which can be explained by growing consumerism in France at the time, and in the way that products were presented to the public in order to make them more appealing. Thus, the contents on the bar counter itself, along with the crowd making merriment, is indicative of semiotic analysis in Iskin's "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*." In light of a Iskin's understanding of those two elements, the other traditional elements of notice within the painting (i.e., the barmaid, her patron, the mirror) are better understood within the context of the times.