



# Demimonde liaisons

**JANE RAFFAN FEASTS ON MODERNITY'S ENTRÉE IN THE BELLE ÉPOQUE THEATRE OF THE DEMIMONDE.**

The Parisian *Belle Époque* ('beautiful era') is arguably one of the most recognisable and lauded periods in the recent history of western civilisation. Its cultural achievements and allure have been canonised in film and literature, and works produced in the period from the late 1800s through to the outbreak of World War One claim prominence in prestigious art collections and auction houses the world over.

Considered a golden age, this period was characterised by extraordinary vitality and optimism, with an unprecedented number of masterpieces in the fields of literature, music, theatre, and visual art produced by a vortex of creative talent. Disseminated through the centrifugal force of Parisian society, it stamped modernity's imprimatur and was to remain an enduring influence on western society's cultural landscape and imagination.

Central to this output was the energy and excitement generated through immersion and engagement with society at street level. The sphere of private salons, in which tight and privileged networks of aristocrats, academics, artists and intellectuals mingled throughout the 1800s, became more liberal as the century wore on, and lost pre-eminence in the Belle Époque.



*Sarah Bernhardt* 1876  
Georges Clairin  
oil on canvas  
Musée de la Ville  
de Paris, Musée du  
Petit-Palais, France  
Bridgeman Images

*Portrait of Madame  
de Florian* c.1898  
Giovanni Boldini  
oil on canvas  
Image courtesy  
Expertise Ottavi  
© Luc Paris

While the private salon was never completely abandoned, the cultural elite moved into the public and highly political realm of the opera, theatres, cabarets, restaurants and cafés, where they mingled with individuals from other levels of society who had sought these venues for the expressive freedom they afforded. As critic Roger Shattuck declared in his illuminating book, *The Banquet Years*, 'the organised yet authentic Bohemia of the Chat Noir was a salon stood on its head'.

Influencing this move were the newly completed Haussmann boulevards, which had transformed Paris 'from a village to a stage'. Shattuck credits the boulevards for creating a theatrical aspect to daily life. Evident across all social and cultural strata, this dramatic flair was epitomised by the term *boulevardier*, invented to describe 'men whose principal accomplishment was arriving at the proper moment at the proper café'.

The 'light-opera atmosphere' of the Parisian Belle Époque was played out in a setting labelled the *demimonde*, meaning 'not quite society' or 'half world'. Originally coined by playwright Alexandre Dumas (the younger) in 1855, the demimonde was a disparagement for a realm with personages who flouted traditional mores and refined bourgeois values in favour of conspicuously hedonistic lifestyles; this included excessive drinking, flagrant drug use, gambling, profligate spending and sexual escapades. The shadowy demimonde came to public prominence in the carnivalesque luminescence of the Belle Époque's street-front cabarets and cafés, revealing the goings-on between diverse players: statesmen, intellectuals, actors, artists, writers, musicians, dandies and decadents from the aristocratic classes down.

Holding a pivotal place in Dumas' demimonde was the *demimondaine*, the uppermost strata in a tier of women



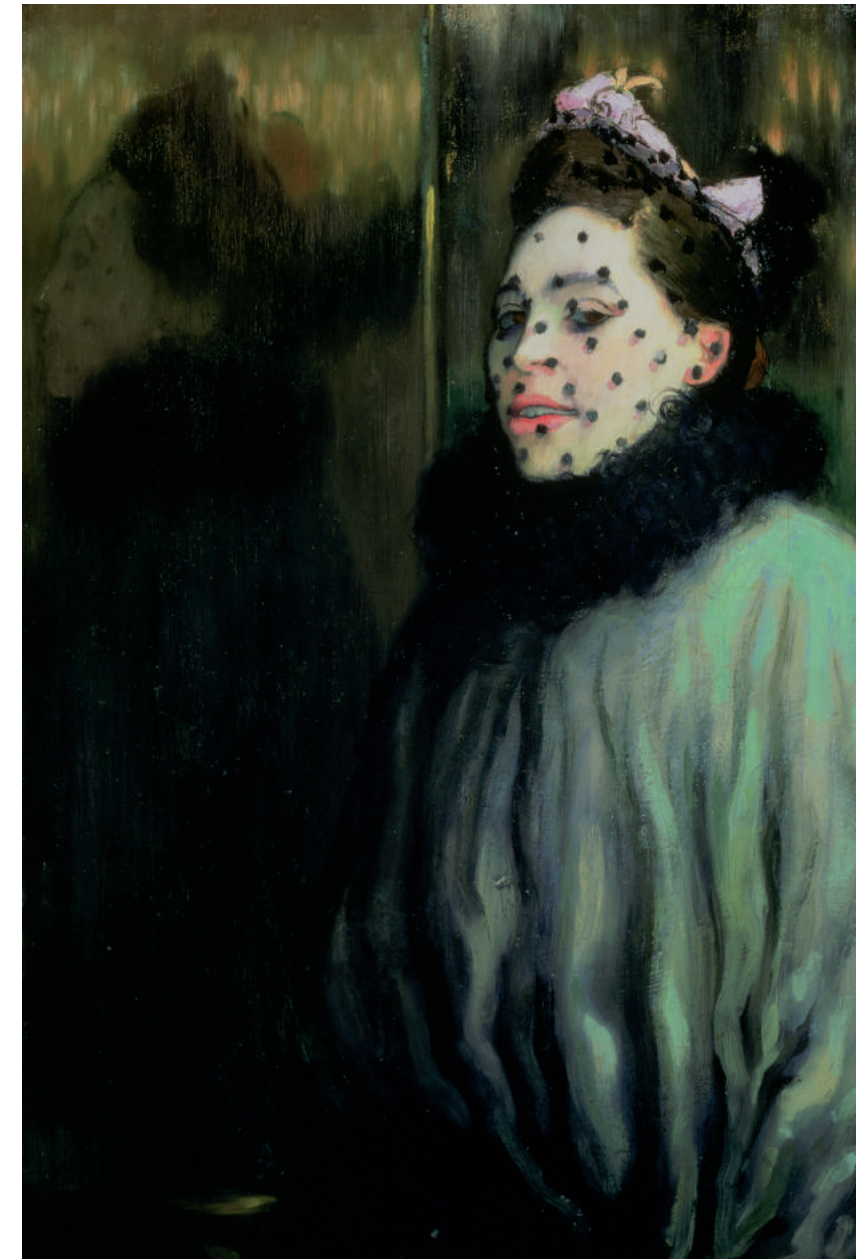
Portrait of Ernest Duez  
1876  
Paul Mathey  
oil on canvas  
Musée des Beaux-Arts/  
Bridgeman Images

Woman with a  
Black Boa 1892  
Henri de Toulouse-  
Lautrec  
oil on cardboard  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris,  
France/Peter Willi/  
Bridgeman Images



Woman in a veil 1891  
Louis Anquetin  
oil on canvas  
Private collection  
Bridgeman Images

Woman at the  
Champs-Élysées by  
night 1890-91  
Louis Anquetin  
oil on canvas  
Van Gogh Museum,  
Amsterdam (purchased  
with the support of  
the BankGiro Loterij  
and the Rembrandt  
Association, with the  
additional support  
from the Prins Bernard  
Cultuurfonds, and the  
VSB foundation)



who relied on their looks and sexual services to survive. By the time of the Belle Époque, le demimonde was densely populated with bohemians and the avant-garde, and les demimondaines were a fixture in society.

Known also as *mademoiselles les cocottes* (hens), or *les grandes horizontales*, demimondaines were beautiful and cultured kept women; they were courtesans to emperors, princes, statesmen and cultural icons. Many shared the same humble beginnings as women in tiers below – for whom there existed an extensive vocabulary characterising the nature of their venality: *lorettes* (low-ranking kept women) and *grisettes* (working women for whom sex occasionally supplemented income) – down to a host of prostitutes accorded derogatory and euphemistic names.

The ranks of the demimondaines were replete with actresses and dancers, the most famous of which was Sara Bernhardt, whose extraordinary talent

earned her the status of *monstre sacré* (sacred monster), a figure elevated beyond public attack despite repeated controversies. Bernhardt lived ‘at the centre of scandal and publicity’, during which time she kept a variety of men infatuated, enthralled and in company. Her likeness – in portraits and in dramatic character – was captured by innumerable painters, photographers, sculptors and graphic artists. Chief among them was her longtime friend, the Orientalist Georges Clairin (1843–1934). His 1876 portrait brilliantly captures her aura: a powerful and alluring presence amidst shimmering satin luxe.

Predominantly, however, these personages were lesser talents, such as Marthe de Florian (born Mathilde Héloïse Beaugiron, 1864–1939), a little-known embroiderer turned actress whose elevated status was only recently discovered. Among the many men reputed to have been de Florian’s lovers were four subsequent prime ministers

of France, and a banker from whom she took her adopted name.

In 2010, a French auction house revealed a ‘time-capsule’ apartment (located between Paris’ red light district and the upscale Opera district) that once belonged to de Florian and which had been closed since its wartime abandonment by her granddaughter. The apartment was stuffed with dusty furniture, pictures and ephemera, and – secreted within a dressing table – bundles of love letters and a large stash of calling cards from statesmen. Within the decorative cacophony was a previously unknown 1898 painting of Marthe by her one-time lover, the famous society portraitist Giovanni Boldini (1842–1931), known as ‘the master of swish’.

The contents of the apartment caused a sensation; fresh collections with notable provenance are an auctioneer’s dream. The portrait sold for a record €2.108 million to a private collector who French art expert Marc Ottavi described as having ‘paid the price of passion’.

De Florian’s life inspired a novel in which it is postulated that the chief difference between une demimondaine and other women engaged in prostitution, apart from *le grande acte* (intercourse), was the former’s indulgence in romance. They also had ‘that something special’: a sense of timing, wit, cunning, daring, gallantry and charm. And drama, so it is told: Shattuck writes that one demimondaine only achieved her rank ‘after inspiring, at minimum, three duels, an unsuccessful suicide and at least one *déniaté* (sexual initiation) of her lover’s eldest son’.

Aside from incidents of high drama

accorded to the lives of these women, demimondaines differed from other women trading sexual services due to the wealth and status of their paramours, and their acceptance in high society. Demimondaines wielded significant and surprising influence, particularly in the field of fashion and interior design, where they outspent their rivals and had responsibilities and obligations, including holding their own salons. The demimondaines’ status caused enough concern to attract police surveillance throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and for their affiliations to be recorded in designated registers.

In 1874, Ernest-Ange Duez (1843–1896) received the third-class medal at the prestigious Paris Salon for a diptych titled *Splendour and Misery* – no doubt adopted from Balzac’s book *Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes* (1838–1847). The painting depicted une cocotte in her prime (Musée Carnavalet, Paris), and then as an old woman (work now lost). The contrasting imagery summed up the reality of the demimondaine’s precarious situation – living testimony of the ‘half world’ from which she might fall or ‘fade into penury and loneliness, or out of which emerge dramatically by marriage’ into the respectable haute-monde.

The vitality of the demimonde and its vivid imagery were explored in the 2015 exhibition, *Splendeurs et Misères: Images de la Prostitution 1850-1910*, staged by the Musée d’Orsay. Aside from its obvious voyeuristic appeal, the exhibition delved into the demimonde’s critical influence on the artistic and literary avant-garde in an era when Paris was perceived as ‘the capital of pleasure’ and ‘a new Babylon’.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), himself from aristocratic origins, was the most famous contemporaneous exponent of this subject matter. His posters, replete with flamboyant imagery of dancers and performers from cafés and cabarets, were widespread, and – in what has been considered anarchic coincidence – many found their way into the homes of the bourgeoisie, leading one commentator to describe them as ‘Trojan horses of modern aesthetics’.

Lautrec’s demimondaine, *Woman with a Black Boa*, 1892, wears signature white face paint, expensive fabrics, elaborate costuming and a confident, direct gaze. Louis Anquetin (1861–1932) met Lautrec in 1884 and became a

pioneer of Cloisonnism, a flat and bold painting style inspired by stained glass and Japanese Ukiyo-e prints. The striking visage and costume depicted in Anquetin’s *Woman in a veil*, 1891, also appears in another less ambiguous work of a streetwalker in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum, *Woman at the Champs-Élysées by night*, 1890-91.

The demimonde was also populated with celebrated male types of the era – dandies and decadents – many of whom were aristocrats, such as Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac (1855–1921), ‘a scion of ancient French nobility’ described as having ‘a reputation for effeteness, wit and the ability to mime at will’.



Portrait of Robert Count of Montesquiou-Fézensac 1879  
Henri Lucien Doucet  
oil on canvas  
Château de Versailles, France  
Bridgeman Images

Portrait of Oscar Wilde 1895  
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec  
oil on canvas  
Private collection  
Bridgeman Images

Symbolist poet, friend to Bernhardt, and self-described 'Lord of Transitory Things', Montesquiou reigned as a dandy provocateur with infinite reach within Parisian high society and its extended artistic, literary and theatrical circles, throughout the Belle Époque. Reflecting on the Count's influence and importance, poetry academic Garrick Davis claimed that 'one of the great shocks of Montesquiou's life was that he had lived to see himself go out of fashion; the second shock was to find that fashion had changed into something he could

not understand or care about ... this was the spiritual death of the dandy and the snob'.

Lucien Doucet's portrait from 1879 depicts a young Montesquiou before his moustache became extravagant, and without a cane, with which he later became identified. Montesquiou achieved notoriety as the model for the unrepentant young Parisian aristocrat, Jean des Esseintes, from the 1884 novel *À Rebours (Against Nature)* by Joris-Karl Huysmans (born Charles Marie Georges, 1848–1907). The novel tells of Des



Esseintes' abandonment of life at thirty, and records his 'strange hedonistic, aesthetic and sexual experiments, and eventual physical collapse' as a recluse.

Des Esseintes admired the Symbolists, and its protagonists are analysed within the novel. In late 19th century France, the terms 'symboliste' and 'décadent' were sometimes closely linked: Des Esseintes was an inspiration for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (first published 1890), and Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) revised references to A Reboours in the 1891 edition from *decadent* to *symbolist* to avoid the novel being stigmatised as a product of 'the leprous literature of the French Decadents'.

Unlike De Montesquiou, who was also a suspected homosexual, Wilde's sexuality and costuming was more risqué and flamboyant. Wilde drew consistent ire from defenders of public morals, and his dandyism – his attire and mannerisms – proved fertile fodder for many cartoons. Montesquiou, too, was occasionally targeted publicly, but he was not averse to dueling with name-callers to protect his reputation.

Wilde and acclaimed author André Gide (1869–1951), whose relationship – both literary and intimate – traversed many years from the 1890s, presented as contrasting public figures. Entranced by Wilde when they met in 1891, Gide's journals record a different view by 1892.



Jonathan Fryer, in his 1997 book, *André and Oscar*, writes that Gide 'began to chart his own real-life maturation against his various moral responses to Wilde's decadent aesthetic pronouncements'.

The relationship proffered fertile ground for Gide to exercise creative impulses and exorcise personal demons. His 1947 Nobel Prize-winning biography declares his genius as living 'on the never resolved tensions between a strict artistic discipline, a puritanical moralism, and the desire for unlimited sensual indulgence and abandonment to life'.

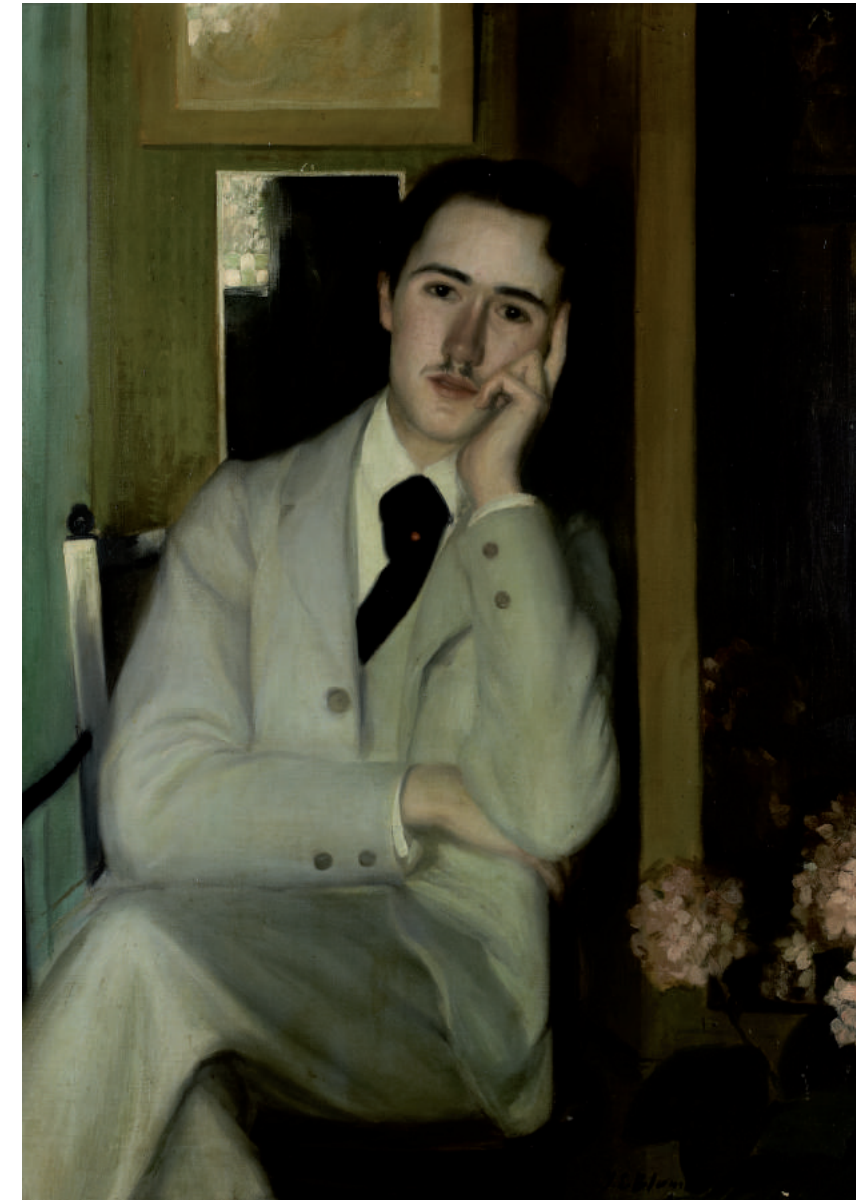
In his sensuous first portrait of Gide, *Portrait of Andre Gide at 21 Years*, 1890, Jacques Émile Blanche (1861–1942) portrays his friend with 'eyes of hematite that fix you with the glance of a preacher'. With André Gide, Blanche wrote, 'you will have truth most brutal'.

Lautrec's *Portrait of Oscar Wilde*, 1895 (presumed lost; resurfaced 2000 for the centenary of the writer's death) was executed on the eve of Wilde's first trial and is one of only two extant painted portraits; most are photographs. Lautrec's friendship with Wilde continued after the poet's shunning, and this watercolour, imbued with pathos, captures the anxious Wilde as a defiant dandy.

In his treatise, *Men in Black*, academic John Harvey writes that the early dandies were 'pioneers of gender, exploring an identity that puzzled contemporaries by seeming at once both manly and feminine'.

Woman in a barouche c. 1889  
Louis Anquetin  
pastel on paper  
Private collection  
Bridgeman Images

Portrait of André Gide c. 1890  
Jacques Émile Blanche  
oil on canvas  
Image courtesy  
Thierry de Maigret, Paris



Wilde's 1895 trials, which centred on his decadence and sexual deviance, are now generally understood to have been 'a convenient focal point for cultural anxieties of the time'. Less well known were fin-de-siècle public displays centred on issues of female sexuality and gender. French poet and man of letters, Catulle Mendès (1841–1909), for example, almost lost his life in a duel defending Sarah Bernhardt's right to play Hamlet in 1899.

Apart from obvious and ambiguous displays of prostitution services aimed at men, the Parisian boulevards and parks were also parade grounds for women seeking encounters with their own sex. *Splendeurs et Misères* includes a nighttime scene by Anquetin depicting a well-to-do woman in a carriage, using an

opera glass to scan for women who will return a direct gaze 'with a rapid flick of her tongue'. These *tribades* (lesbians) were sometimes depicted with a poodle in their laps, a tell-tale symbol of their peculiar venality.

Prostitution and deviance as defining subjects for the artistic avant-garde was virtually eclipsed by the outbreak of World War One. Its pinnacle was arguably Picasso's 1907 proto-cubist ferocious brothel masterpiece, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. K. No. 145)*, often credited as heralding the birth of modern art. The avant-garde arguably spawned Modernity much earlier, however, as evinced in the demimonde of the Parisian Belle Époque, where, in Shattuck's words 'the twentieth century was born, yelling, in 1885'. ■