MASKS AND MUSES: MARIE LAURENCIN'S ARTIST-GROUP PORTRAITS

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For Nils, who believed that challenging women are beautiful.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines two artist-group portraits by the painter Marie Laurencin (1883-1965), *Group of Artists* (1908) and *Apollinaire and His Friends* (1909). Because Laurencin was a member of the “Bateau-Lavoir” group—a loose collective of vanguard artists and thinkers who frequented Pablo Picasso’s Montmartre studio—scholars tend to view these portraits through a purely biographical lens. This thesis shifts attention to the stylistic and conceptual aspects of Laurencin’s approach to portraiture, with particular focus on the artist’s engagement with Cubism, then the dominant style within the Parisian vanguard. In these two group portraits, Laurencin drew upon aspects of Cubism during a crucial early moment in the formation of that movement; in so doing, she affirmatively affiliated herself with the *bande à Picasso* and asserted her legitimacy as an avant-garde painter. However, her adoption of Cubism was both provisional and self-conscious. As a woman artist, Laurencin could claim only a partial membership in a male-dominated circle; the hybrid style that she created for her group portraits comment directly on the tensions between her painterly ambitions and the limitations she faced. In this way, Laurencin’s two artist-group portraits constituted visual or pictorial manifesti: they demonstrated her prowess as an avant-gardist and her awareness of the intricate networks of the period’s art movements, even as they mobilized the ideological and conceptual associations of those styles to point to her particular position as an “exceptional” female modernist painter.
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INTRODUCTION

“What would be better than to stimulate even deeper interest in the paintings and sculpture women have made, and to fuel other efforts to explicate them? Such efforts are always necessary to understand works of art, but they are especially necessary when the artist is a woman. The necessity stems, not from the fact of womanhood, but from the social and cultural circumstances of female life—from the circumstances of sexual difference, in other words. Difference determines position and inflects experience. It has enforced subordination and dependency. And it also shapes psychic accommodations to bodily facts: it shapes fantasy.”

-Anne Wagner

“One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into a form of affirmation and thus to being to thwart it.”

-Luce Irigaray

Marie Laurencin (1883-1965) was a painter based in Paris who built a significant reputation from 1908 through the interwar era. Despite her success, she has proven extremely difficult to place in relation to the period’s established avant-garde movements. Though her style is distinctly modernist, with a tendency toward simplification of form and expressive brushwork, it does not easily fit any one of the early twentieth-century “isms.” Rather than attempting to engage with why and how Laurencin’s style related to that of her male peers, art critics and art historians all too often treat the artist as a “Picasso manqué,” or a second-rate mimic of Picasso. Her idealizing portraits of fashionable women, a mainstay of her career, are regarded as partially or wholly capitulating to hetero-normative constructs of the female ideal as it manifested in the first decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, because Laurencin was a member of the “Bateau Lavoïr” group scholars have tended to view these portraits through a purely biographical lens, emphasizing Laurencin’s personal relationships at the expense of her highly complex

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1 Anne Wagner, Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O’Keeffe
2 Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76.
artworks. Laurencin is, for these reasons, viewed as an artist who simply celebrated the style and beauty of modern women, not as a figure who actively engaged with the intense theoretical and stylistic debates of the Parisian avant-garde during the dynamic period from 1900 to 1914.

The aim of this thesis is to counteract the tendency to simplify Laurencin’s approach to art-making through an examination of her two early artist-group portraits, *Group of Artists* (1908; fig. 1) and *Apollinaire and His Friends* (1909; fig. 2). To accomplish this goal, I shift attention to the stylistic and conceptual aspects of Laurencin’s work: I show that she actively engaged with Cubism, then the dominant style within the Parisian vanguard, to frame her position vis-à-vis that artistic movement and its practitioners. In these two group portraits, I argue, Laurencin drew upon aspects of Cubism during a crucial early moment in the formation of that movement. In so doing, she affirmatively affiliated herself with the *bande à Picasso* and asserted her legitimacy as an avant-garde painter. However, her adoption of Cubism was both provisional and self-conscious. As a woman artist, Laurencin could claim only a partial membership in a male-dominated circle; the hybrid style that she created for her group portraits comments directly on the tensions between her painterly ambitions and the limitations she faced. In this way, Laurencin’s two artist-group portraits constituted visual or pictorial manifesti: they demonstrated her prowess as an avant-gardist and her awareness of the intricate networks of the period’s art movements, even as they mobilized the ideological and conceptual associations of those vanguard styles to point to her particular position as an “exceptional” female modernist painter. Laurencin, that is, engaged deeply with the stylistic, conceptual, and ideological underpinnings of Cubism—but her relationship to Cubism was, as she made clear in her works, necessarily shaped by her identity as a woman artist. In making this claim, I am not suggesting that Laurencin’s femininity was essential or determinative in a biological sense. Rather,
following Anne Wagner’s observation that “difference determines experience,” I argue that Laurencin had to come to terms with the impact of her own gender difference in order to make space for herself in the art world.

Laurencin’s engagement with Cubism is manifested most clearly in these two artist-group portraits, both produced when the artist was most closely affiliated with Picasso and the Bateau-Lavoir circle. The stylistic simplicity of these group portraits, I would argue, belies their conceptual complexity, and that apparent simplicity may account for the straightforward way that scholars generally treat them. However, close formal, iconographic, and semiotic analysis of these portraits elucidates Laurencin’s strategic deployment of select Cubist practices—in particular, the motif of the mask as a tool through which to experiment with the pictorial signifiers of identity. I adapt the model provided by semiotic interpretations of Cubism to show that Laurencin adeptly mobilize that style to powerfully different ends than her male peers.

4 Laurencin did complete on other artist-group portrait, a work from 1910 entitled André Salmon’s Court, although it is unclear weather or not she included a self-portrait in this painting or no. Elizabeth Louise Kahn has suggested so, however the female figures in this work as so highly abstracted that it is unclear. For the sake of clarity this work remains outside of the purview of this study.

5 Patricia Leighten, “Cubist Anachronisms: Ahistoricity, Cryptoformalism and Business-as-Usual in New York.” Oxford Art Journal 17, no. 2 (1994): 91-102. Well known structuralist and semiotic interpretations of Cubism, which draw from the linguistic theory of Saussure and Balthkin, have been used to great effect buy Scholars such as Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois. Their methods of interpretation are staunchly ahistorical and anti-biographical. However, other scholars like Patricia Leighten have shown that historical context is an important element of correctly applying Saussurian theories to the visual arts. Leighten writes of Picasso that “His anti-traditional maneuvers – for example conflating aspects of African masks with recognizable Venus or Madonna and Child motifs in 1907 – function in subversive relation to the culture of high art, supporting institutions, and religious ideology. And his Cubism systematically disrupts representational codes of the nineteenth-century academic art on which he was raised, not only successfully for a time resisting absorption into the polymorphous world of bourgeois taste, but openly satirizing that taste.” 97. For other examples of structural and post-structural interpretations of Cubism see: Rosalind Kraus, Picasso Papers (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1998). Christine Poggie, In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism and the Invention of Collage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).
This strategy of adaptation allowed Laurencin to address the issue of her own gendered relationship to the Cubist movement. Through Cubism, she constructed a visual language that signaled her affiliation to that movement and, at the same time, allowed her to show that, as a woman artist, such an affiliation could be tenuous at best. From my analysis I extrapolate two important, and often unacknowledged, truths about Laurencin’s portraiture: first, that she actively engaged with the fundamental conceptual and stylistic questions that also preoccupied Picasso in the years of what might be termed “proto-Cubism”—and with other movements of the period, including Fauvism. Secondly, Laurencin experimented with those styles in a way that helped her to define her position as female artist, and to comment on that position within the very works that she produced.

The artist-group portraits at the heart of this project thus serve as ideal case studies to demonstrate Laurencin’s investment in the conceptual tenets of the avant-garde styles of her day. I characterize her choice to depict herself alongside her peers as a strategic and a self-conscious move. As Bridget Alsdorf has shown in her work on the nineteenth-century precedents for Laurencin’s work, the artist-group portrait serves as a kind of manifesto, that is to say, a statement about one’s artistic ideologies, affiliations, and networks. Laurencin’s group portraits position the painter with other central figures of the avant-garde, pictorially defining how she identified in relation to the larger modernist group of which she was a part.

Ironically, the fact that only a small audience of intimates had access to both works underscores their function as manifesti, or coded messages. *Group of Artists* hung in Gertrude Stein’s apartment, where the writer and collector held her famous salons; *Apollinaire and His Friends* was a gift to Guillaume Apollinaire, and hung in his home. In keeping with the tendency toward exclusivity and an “in-joke” atmosphere that pervaded the *bande à Picasso*, the subtlety
of Laurencin’s appropriations of Cubism and Fauvism likely would have been legible only to the avant-garde insiders who saw these works during that period. Absent the particular circumstances of this original context, the “in-joke” more or less disappeared for outside viewers, both then and now. The gesture of making such pictorial commentaries served further to affirm Laurencin’s own insider status: the group portraits literally and metaphorically placed her precisely in the midst of the network that she both depicted and commented upon in them.

Indeed, it may be that the very direction of these works to an “insider” culture ultimately prevented later scholars from fully understanding the complex messages embedded within. As I note above, scholars who have discussed Laurencin have focused primarily on the artist’s biography, and tend to read her works with a focus on her links to better-known male figures within the avant-garde. Frequently, the innovative elements of her work are attributed to the creative genius of Apollinaire, who was her lover at that time, or to Picasso. The details of her relationships to those male “geniuses,” and her time spent at the Bateau-Lavoir, thus have drawn more attention than her work itself. Such an approach simultaneously denies Laurencin’s participation as an active agent in her own artmaking while affirming the canonical status of her male counterparts.

Another reason that Laurencin still remains on the margins of modernist art history may have to do with her uncomfortable relation to existing conceptions of feminism. The imagery in her work of the 1920s and 1930s, which abounds with beautiful women depicted in a soft pastel palette—idealized images that embody a dominant notion of femininity in that period—has impacted the way that we understand her earlier works, including the artist-group portraits. Those early works often are read through the lens of her later, more stereotypically feminine images. To further complicate this issue, Laurencin herself, in interviews and memoirs, staunchly
affirmed traditional notions of gender difference. Thus, on the surface, Laurencin does not fit the typical image of what a feminist looks like. Her life and work demonstrate, in fact, how difficult it can be for historians today to comprehend a “feminine” feminist position. Laurencin projected an idealized femininity, even as she played that socially-constructed role in a self-conscious, and possibly even subversive, way. Her feminist gesture inhered in the act of “assuming the feminine role deliberately”—the position that Luce Irigaray describes in the passage that I quote above. It is tempting to cast Laurencin as either an artist who simply embraced the role of the femme-peintre—a painter of ladies, flowers, and the like—or as a kind of failed feminist who retreated from the potentially controversial content after she became successful. The reality, I would argue, is that she embodied both roles at the same time—appropriating the image of the ideal woman and using it distinguish herself amongst a group of predominantly male avant-gardists.

Still, recuperating Laurencin’s role in the modernist discourse is no easy task. The issue of her sexuality provides yet another complicating factor in determining her position within the feminist art-historical canon. She was a bisexual artist, romantically linked to men for the first half of her life, and to women for the majority of her later years. However, Laurencin never publicly claimed a lesbian identity in the way that her contemporaries Gertrude Stein and Natalie Barney did. The tendency thus has been for scholars to ignore the issue of her relationships with women entirely, although to do so denies the significant potential for a homoerotic reading of her work. This is a critical issue to overlook, considering that her works of the 1920s and 30s essentially created a fantasy world entirely populated by women. On the other hand, more recent efforts to recast her as a lesbian artist have erased or reduced the complexities of her relationship

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6 Paula Birnbaum, *Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities*. Farnham (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 112. Paula Birnbaum makes just such a claim. She argues that Laurencin’s more impressionist styled early self-portraits from 1904 and 1905 are evidence of Laurencin’s attempt to assert her into a male dominated art world. She sees the bulk of her later output as a retreat from such attempts.
to Apollinaire and other men, minimizing their impact on her work, and by extension negating that which she shared professionally and artistically with them. As with the issue of her feminism, the nature of the sexual politics of Laurenchin’s oeuvre requires a nuanced handling. She constantly leaves space in her paintings for multiple identities: the hetero-normative and the counter-cultural, the feminine and the feminist. While the early artist group portraits analyzed here do not appear to engage with the issue of homoerotic desire to the same extent as her later paintings, the analysis that I present of her gendered identity in these early works may help to illuminate aspects of her later career.

Because the artist-group portraits directly address her art-world affiliations and her artistic identity, the problematic issue of her reception, both in her own time and afterward, serves as the subject of my first chapter. I address the complex group of primary source documents that have come together to form the current image of Laurenchin’s personality and practice, and closely examine recent art-historical analyses that attempt to integrate Laurenchin into a feminist art-historical discourse. My review of the literature calls for a reading of Laurenchin’s works that takes seriously her active engagement in avant-garde debates of her time, even as it also notes how she brought her own particular set of concerns as a female artist to bear on her portraits.

The second chapter focuses on Laurenchin’s first artist-group portrait, *Group of Artists*. I return this painting to the original context of its production, considering it as a commentary on avant-garde portrait practice—with special attention to the modes Picasso employed during this formative, proto-Cubist stage. I adapt post-structuralist readings of Picasso’s and Braque’s later Analytic and Synthetic Cubist works, applying that approach both to Laurenchin’s and to Picasso’s portraits of this period. This analysis makes clear that a similar experimentation with
the signs and signifiers of identity is at play in both artists’ work, and points to a direct exchange of ideas between the two. In the work of both, the act of masking their portrait sitters is significant: the mask functions stylistically, allowing these artists to abstract from life, and it also functions as a tool for exploring the relation of a portrait to the sitter’s identity. However, what distinguishes Laurencin from Picasso, and from her other male contemporaries, is her distinctive take on the group portrait, which ties in to the genre’s long, predominantly homo-social tradition. After positioning Laurencin’s group portraits in this larger tradition, it becomes easier to identify the implications of her choice of subject as a female artist, and the gendered readings that it generates. I argue that Laurencin’s self-representation within the portrait, coupled with her use of a Cubist experimentation with pictorial signs, led her to produce a group portrait in which meaning, and by extension identity, is relational, reflexive and unfixed: it is impossible to determine a single, declarative meaning in this constellation of figures. In this context, it becomes evident that Laurencin utilized the vocabulary of Cubism to develop an approach to portraiture and self-portraiture that could accommodate the particularities of her experience as female avant-garde painter.

The third chapter follows Laurencin’s career as it developed within the constantly shifting dynamics of the Parisian avant-garde. My analysis centers on the second and larger of Laurencin’s two group portraits, *Apollinaire and His Friends* (sometimes also referred to as *Reunion in the Country*), in which she reformulated her dual roles of muse and artist in order to accommodate new circumstances in the art world. Here, Laurencin incorporates the figures of her first group portrait into an idyllic landscape brimming with classical allusions. I argue that Laurencin produced this work at a moment of shifting allegiances within her circle: she found herself excluded from access to the new Cubist practice that Picasso and Braque jointly
developed thanks to the financial support of the gallerist Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler. Returning to the potent genre of the artist-group portrait, she drew upon classical and pastoral traditions in an effort to draw Fauvism, then Cubism’s main rival, into her dialogue with the latter style. Again, she used the portrait to claim a particular space for herself as an avant-gardist—one simultaneously linked to, but also distinct from, both Fauvism and Cubism. By developing a unique style that was legible as distinctively “Laurencin,” she was able to distinguish herself from her peers, while also making manifest her insider knowledge of avant-garde aesthetic tropes and tactics. In this painting, Laurencin actively laid claim to a uniquely female form of avant-gardism, one that she arguably would continue to develop for the remainder of her career (though an exploration of that material remains beyond the scope of the current project).

By looking closely at these two early works by Laurencin, it becomes possible to re-assign her a degree of artistic agency in the conceptual and stylistic development of her art, one that might eventually be traced through the rest of her career. This nuanced approach is valuable for a variety of reasons. First, it helps to recuperate Laurencin’s image as a legitimate member of the avant-garde who had a serious investment in experimentation with a set of strategies similar to those of the men with whom she was closely associated. Secondly, in identifying Laurencin’s engagement with the aesthetic concerns of Cubism and Fauvism, new avenues for addressing the contribution of other women artists to the early twentieth-century avant-garde may open up. Finally, by considering the ways in which Laurencin contributed to discourses about Cubist practice in its early years, our understanding of the movement itself might be further complicated. If Laurencin’s early works are redefined as examples of proto-Cubist portraiture, then our understanding of Cubist portraiture may broaden, and the ends that such works served for their makers may be recontextualized. Laurencin’s early group portraits show how artists of
this period—a period in which almost every aspect of art radically changed—could both work within and explode existing artistic traditions. These works also show how women artists could use existing genres (such as portraiture) to explore their identities as artists and as women, without wholly or straightforwardly submitting to the hetero-normative premises upon which those genres had long been based.⁷

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⁷ Especially when one considers the potential for a homoerotic reading of Laurencin’s work, this seems like a limited interpretation.
CHAPTER 1

“THE CRY OF THE GRAND LAMA”: THE RECEPTION OF MARIE LAURENCIN

“She sat down and seemed to be taking part in the conversation, which she then interrupted with a shrill, inarticulate cry…There was an astonished silence…‘It’s the cry of the Grand Lama,’ she informed us helpfully.”

- Fernande Olivier

Marie Laurencin was a prolific and critically-acclaimed painter. She maintained a robust career as a society portraitist, while also working as a book illustrator. She exhibited frequently at the Salon des Indépendants beginning in 1909; she spent the years of World War I in Spain, but after her return to Paris in 1920, she resumed a highly successful career, working in a variety of media and showing in Paris and the United States through the 1940s. Like many avant-gardists of her day, she worked as a designer for the Ballets Russes troupe, on the 1924 production Les Biches. From 1913 to 1940, she was represented by the dealer Paul Rosenberg, and she often showed in the same venues as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Henri Matisse, which included Rosenberg’s gallery as well as those of Berthe Weil, and Daniel Henri-Kahnweiler. Laurencin was, in short, a major artist during the heyday of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde.

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9 Elizabeth Louise Kahn, *Maire Laurencin: Une Femme Inadaptee in Feminist Histories of Art*. Hants: (Ashgate, 2013), 8. Because Laurencin’s husband Otto van Wätjen was German, by French law Laurencin was considered a German citizen by marriage, both were exiled during the war years. They lived in Spain and Laurencin’s biographers (Nicole Groult and Elizabeth Louise Kahn) describe this as an extremely difficult period of her life.

In subsequent years, however, the style and content of her work have proven extremely difficult for art historians to position within the context of the various avant-garde factions and movements of the period. Consequently, Laurencin is little discussed in histories of modern art; when her name is mentioned, she often is depicted as an outlier or marginal figure to the mainstream art world. Scholars acknowledge that she worked in proximity to significant players of early modernism, but rarely posit that she was influenced by, or engaged with their works—or they with hers. Her career is decontextualized in most accounts, in spite of the fact that Laurencin was deeply entrenched in not one but several intersecting artistic and intellectual communities in Paris. For these reasons, the critical and conceptual contribution of Laurencin’s oeuvre to the history of modernism has dropped out of the art-historical discourse.

The rise of feminist art-historical analysis in the 1970s and 80s prompted a broad re-evaluation of women artists’ relation to the art-historical canon. During those years, early feminist art historians worked to recuperate female artists who had never fit into the teleological, formalist narrative of modernism espoused by critics and curators including Clement Greenberg and Alfred Barr. At first glance, Laurencin would seem an ideal candidate for the efforts of those pioneering feminist scholars. Though she was raised by a single mother who worked as a seamstress, her ambition to become an artist led her to secure a reputation and income so

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11 Bridget Elliot, "The ‘Strength of the Weak’ as Portrayed by Marie Laurencin." *Genders* 24 (1996): 69-92. Elliott notes that Laurencin was represented by Paul Rosenberg from 1913 to 1940. He also represented Picasso, Matisse and Braque. Laurencin also showed in Berthe Weil and Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler’s galleries.

12 Aside from the Bateau-Lavoir, Laurencin has been linked to Dada and helped to edit several Dadaist publications. She was also a member of Natalie Barney’s salon and was commissioned by Barney to make a set of illustrations to go along with a translation of Sappho’s poems.

13 Gere’s text is an ideal example of this kind of effort. Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1965).
significant that by the end of her career she owned a large home in an affluent neighborhood in Paris as well as a country house. Laurencin’s impressive professional presence and her close association with many of the major male figures of modernism provide ample fodder for a reinterpretation of her work. But such a full, robust account of Laurencin’s oeuvre remains to be written.

As I shall show in this chapter, the existing scholarship on Laurencin tends to center on the artist’s biography and personal identity, which overshadows any analysis of her artworks themselves. Laurencin’s proximity to (now) canonical male figures of the avant-garde has likely played a part in this. Interpreters of her career consistently circle back to her relationship to her male peers, most frequently Picasso and the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who was Laurencin’s lover from around 1907 to 1912. However, it should also be noted that Laurencin’s working practice itself encouraged this continual return to her biography. Throughout her career, female portraits and self-portraits predominate; indeed, she often conflated the two genres by producing such simplified and stylized representations of women that their faces and bodies become almost interchangeable. This easily recognizable and highly stylized aesthetic became the central hallmark of Laurencin’s style. This conflation of the self with the sitter, along with the historical circumstance of her proximity to famous men, has produced a discourse on the artist in which Laurencin’s personal life almost entirely eclipses any analysis of individual works and their relation to broader avant-garde practices. This chapter reviews that discourse with the aim of showing the necessity to reposition both Laurencin’s career and her paintings within the original dynamic context of the avant-garde that forged them.

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14 Elliott, “The ‘Strength of the Weak.” 75. Elliot provides detailed imagery of Laurencin’s Paris apartment as described in multiple interviews in women’s magazines of the day.
As I discuss in what follows, there also seems to be an inherently problematic element to Laurencin’s work that prevents most feminist scholars from addressing it in any detail: her style is deemed too “feminine.” At first glance, and especially to the contemporary viewer, Laurencin’s images of women seem to enforce traditional gender norms, at times to an extreme degree. The elegant, flowing lines of the female body; the tendency to show women in nature or engaged in “delicate” activities such as dancing or playing music; and perhaps most prominently, her preference for a pastel palette, all draw on a visual rhetoric of femininity (Figs. 3 & 4). It would seem, in examining the way that feminist scholars have discussed Laurencin to date, that current methodologies of feminist art-historical analysis are not equipped to address the complex way that Laurencin treats gender. Studies that have attempted to divine a blatant critique of traditional gender norms have fallen short of acknowledging the multiple issues at play in her portraits. Thus, not unlike her alter ego, the eccentric “Grand Lama,” described by Fernande Olivier in the account quoted above, Laurencin has become somewhat of a novelty in feminist histories of art: a fascinating but ultimately singular figure. Why is it so difficult for art historians, feminist or otherwise, to talk about the work of Marie Laurencin? What is it about her work that makes it so challenging to discuss in the context of its production? Is there a way to successfully apply a “feminist” reading to Laurencin’s work?

My aim in this thesis is to provide such a feminist analysis by developing an interpretation of Laurencin’s works that takes seriously their intelligent relation to avant-garde styles and theories of the period. Laurencin undoubtedly acquainted herself with debates among the current vanguard while in the company of not only Apollinaire and Picasso, but also the

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15 As cited above, Olivier recounts in her memoir, Laurencin’s bizarre “cry of the grand lama.” Oliver’s anecdote, while told in the context of her memoir to draw attention to Laurencin’s affected personality, also mirrors the experience to trying to firmly position her in the avant-garde while looking at the scholarship. She seems as out of place, at moments, as a Lama in Picasso’s studio. However, further examination reveals that she, in fact courted such a persona, in an effort to secure her position as a unique member of the avant-garde.
collectors Gertrude and Leo Stein; the painters Henri Matisse and Henri Rousseau; the critic André Salmon; and the wider circle of artists, writers and critics who circulated between the Stein house and the Bateau-Lavoir studios. The following review of primary sources and current scholarship on the artist is designed to open up a space for such a reading of her professional identity and ambitions.

Establishing Laurencin’s Femininity: Period Accounts of the Artist, 1909-1933

From the very beginning of her career, Laurencin’s works were discussed in terms of their purportedly “feminine” qualities—as was the case with most women artists in this period. Critics looked to the style of her works for some expression of an inherent female perspective, thereby conflating Laurencin’s gender identity with her artistic identity. Numerous critics discussed Laurencin’s work at length, including Apollinaire, Salmon, and Roger Allard, all members of the closely-knit Bateau-Lavoir circle.¹⁶ These texts deem Laurencin a success as an artist, but define that success in highly gendered terms. They project onto her work a biologically-determined conception of gender difference—one that, not coincidentally, mirrors her own self-fashioning as an ultra-feminine figure. Apollinaire, for example, described Laurencin as “endowed with the greatest possible number of feminine qualities and…free of all masculine shortcomings.”¹⁷ Allard characterized her style as derived from a uniquely female form of narcissism.¹⁸ From the moment of her entrée into the avant-garde, Laurencin’s


¹⁷ Apollinaire, 44.

¹⁸ Allard, 7.
femininity was a key factor in defining her relationship to the larger group. One might construe such strongly gendered language as a form of critical mistreatment. But even as the critics of her day labeled her work inherently feminine, they also frequently contradicted their own gendered rhetoric. Apollinaire, for example, described her work as “more masculine than that of other women who devote themselves to the plastic arts”—a description not often acknowledged by recent accounts.\(^1\) Apollinaire’s contradictory statements highlight the overlooked complexities of Laurencin’s reception: astute viewers were often aware of the contradictory qualities of apparently “feminine” paintings.

Literary accounts of Laurencin’s personality written by some of her contemporaries further undermine her professional legitimacy. They portray the artist as narcissistic and frivolous—characterizations that have been perpetuated in later years. These include Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932), and the memoirs of Fernande Olivier.\(^2\) In her first reference to Laurencin in her text, Stein casts the former as an outsider:

> Everybody called Gertrude Stein Gertrude, or at most Mademoiselle Gertrude, everybody called Picasso Pablo and Fernande Fernande and everybody called

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\(^1\) Apollinaire, 67. Apollinaire’s quote about Laurencin’s feminine purity is bar far the most quoted observation made by a critic in her own lifetime. The complicated fact that he was her lover at this time, and arguably in agreement with her about how he might present her image publically is generally not discussed. Even more importantly, in 1910 for his review of the Salon des Independents, Apollinaire observed, “The three paintings by Mlle. Marie Laurencin indicate considerable progress in the artist’s work. Her art is more masculine than that of the other women who devote themselves to the plastic arts; and coupled with this ideal virility are a grace and a charm that one will find nowhere else. One feels, in her canvases entitled *The Dressing Table, Study and Still-Life*, that she has a self-assured command of her craft and an imagination imbued with a very decorative plastic lyricism.” (67). Other scholars have also addressed this issue of a feminizing rhetoric, especially in the works of impressionist women such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt. See: Tamar Garb, “Berthe Morisot and the Feminizing of Impressionism,”191-201. Pollock, Grisellda, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art. (London: Rutledge, 1988), 50-90.

Guillaume Apollinaire Guillaume and Max Jacob Max but everybody called Marie Laurencin Marie Laurencin. In a move consistent with her writing style, Stein does not explain this rather enigmatic observation, but it is clear that she treats Laurencin differently than the other figures mentioned. Immediately following this passage, Stein goes on to describe Laurencin’s near-sightedness (also noted in the journals of Laurencin’s friend Rene Gimpel), and her habit of examining paintings through a lorgnette. Stein writes that Laurencin only examined the paintings in her immediate sight, and ignored those that were high on the wall or out of the way. One might read this description as an assault on Laurencin’s vision, and thus her efficacy as a painter, an attempt to show that Laurencin did not know how to look in the appropriate way. To make matters worse, later in her book, Stein recounts a dinner party held in Picasso’s apartment to honor the painter Henri Rousseau. Here she describes Laurencin as a drunken mess, who almost ruined the party and upset the hostess (Fernande Olivier, to whom I will turn momentarily). Although Stein was one of Laurencin’s first patrons, purchasing the Group of Artists and hanging it in her home on the Rue de Fleurus, it would appear that by 1933 she had no interest in perpetuating Laurencin’s reputation as an avant-gardist.

Olivier, Picasso’s lover during the years prior to the war, characterized Laurencin her memoirs as “affected” and “a bit silly.” In a section of her 1933 memoir entitled “Marie Laurencin’s Painting,” Olivier observes that, in her opinion, Laurencin’s success was entirely attributable to the latter’s association with Apollinaire and his promotion of her art. Of

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21 Ibid., 60.


23 Stein, 61.

24 Ibid., 105.
Laurencin’s portraits, Olivier writes, “Perhaps she wasn’t capable of greater depth. Affectation combined, I think, with bogus naïveté, is the mainspring of some of the strange effects of her compositions.” Olivier’s vindictive depiction of Laurencin is noteworthy insofar as, although the section is titled “Marie Laurencin’s Painting,” it focuses almost exclusively on the painter’s personality, (The same is true for Stein, who describes Laurencin’s mannerisms in detail but pays no attention to her artwork, other than to refer to it as “strange.”) The fact that both of these women writers responded negatively to Laurencin’s persona seems related to the later issue that feminist art historians take with her work. It appears that Laurencin’s appropriation of the ideal feminine type, in her persona and in her art, was problematic for both writers. For whatever particular aspect of her personality was so offsetting to both women, the result is that she repeatedly become the victim of their literary abuse. Given that later scholars frequently turned to the writings of Stein and Olivier in their efforts to construct an image of Laurencin, it seems critical to note that both women published their recollections of Laurencin almost twenty years after the break-up of the Bateau-Lavoir group. It seems likely that Laurencin’s mainstream success during the 1920s had an impact on these accounts. Laurencin’s later popularity as a society portraitist, painting well-known figures like Coco Chanel (1923; Fig. 5) may have negated her bohemian roots.

However, as I note above, the root of the struggle to separate biography from artistic output can actually be traced back to Laurencin herself. Laurencin courted a reading of her work as “feminine,” and throughout her career, she actively sought to blur the lines between her life  

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25 Olivier, 108-109

26 Just because Stein doesn’t talk about Laurencin’s art in her writing doesn’t mean that she didn’t see any value in it. On the contrary, Stein was the first person to purchase a work by Laurencin. She bought “Group of Artists” in 1909 at the start of Laurencin’s career.
and her art in several ways.\textsuperscript{27} In her memoirs wrote that the genius of men intimidated her but that she “felt perfectly at ease with everything feminine.”\textsuperscript{28} She actively sought to distance herself from notions of male genius. She cultivated a public persona that blended the look of the women in her paintings with her own image. Although photographs show that Laurencin was a rather stout woman, she was frequently described as elfin-like; she was associated both with images of the \textit{femme-enfant} or “woman child,” and with the boyish style of the new-woman, or the flapper by the 1920s.\textsuperscript{29} The women in her paintings embody this aesthetic: with slender, elongated limbs and delicate features, they appear “elfin” (Figs. 6 & 7). However, Laurencin portrayed herself, both in real life and in her art, far more ambiguously than the reception of her work would admit. She dressed (and posed) wearing “masculine” clothing (Fig. 8), and in several cases, she painted women as Amazon-like figures, the latter associated in this period with the lesbian counter-culture (Fig. 9). The “reality” of her identity both inside and outside the frame, thus seems to have constantly vacillated between various different identities. Or, as I shall argue, because no one single identity fit her, she actively played a variety of roles, playing with the relationship between all of them in the early group portraits that I analyze in chapters two and three.

\textsuperscript{27} There are many examples of women artists who have received more biographical attention than critical studies of their actual work. However, what seems interesting in looking at the Laurencin work in relation to the scholarship is the degree to which she appears to have cultivated such a reading. Whether this was a canny awareness of the relationship between her gender and her art making on the part of the artist is yet to be addressed.

\textsuperscript{28} Bridget Elliot and Jo-ann Wallace, \textit{Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)positionings} (London: Roudletge, 1994), 90. From Laurencin’s memoirs \textit{Le Carnet de Nuits} (1956), 16. Elliott and wallace provide an indepth comparison of the way that Laurencin and Stein both attempted to appropriate the notion of male genius. As Wallace and Elliott observe, Stein’s embrace of the traditionally masculine role of thinker and genius was more easily absorbed into pre-existing social structures than Laurencin’s feminized brand of genius.

\textsuperscript{29} Allard, Apollinaire and Salmon all make reference to Laurencin as elfin-like, or make allusions to her status as a “woman-child.”
If Laurencin played with gender identity in her life and work, though, in public statements made throughout her career she actively encouraged a reading of her work as “feminine” in character. She defined that femininity in opposition to conceptual methods of art making, which she (following most critics of the time) associated with a masculine approach to painting. In a 1934 interview with Mary Todd for *Arts and Decoration* (a British magazine), Laurencin stated that

> I conceive of a woman’s role to be of a different nature; painting to be essentially a ‘job’ for a woman (one sits so long quiet on a chair); and a painter’s ideal inspiration to be life and that of a natural sensibility rather than the outcome of intellect or reason. There is something incongruous to me in the vision of a strong man sitting all day [sic] manipulating small paintbrushes, something essentially effeminate.  

Here, Laurencin portrayed a conceptual approach to art as the province of male artists, and something in which she had little interest. However, the physical act of painting itself was an activity that she labeled inherently feminine—following the age-old association of masculinity with intellect and reason, femininity with base matter. This emphasis on detail also recalls her practice of closely examining the paintings in the Stein collection through her lorgnette. In such statements, Laurencin seems actively invested in reaffirming pre-existing conceptions of gender difference.

Laurencin’s staging of a child-like, naïve, beauty-obsessed public identity seems designed to reinforce the conventional assumption of inherent differences between male and female artists’ approaches to art-making and, more broadly, an essentialist conception of gender difference.

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30 Dorothy Todd, “Marie Laurencin’s Exotic Canvases Shited to Modern Decorations.” *Arts and Decoration* (June 1928): 64, 92-96, 92. Todd’s interjection has been cut from the quote above where she comments that: “Marie Laurencin always sits to paint.” Bridget Elliot has parced Todd’s interview in detail in her article “the Strength of the Weak as Portrayed by Marie Laurencin.” She notes that Todd’s interjection actively affirms the essentialist image of Laurencin’s femininity.

31 Ibid.
difference. Such statements contrast with the visual evidence of Laurencin’s engagement with the ideologies of the avant-garde; I argue that they should be read critically, as a strategic staging of her roles as the femme-peintre. The combination of Laurencin’s own claim to a feminine ideal, her contemporary critics re-enforcement of that notion, and these later descriptions of her as shallow and contriving lay the foundation for the present-day image of the artist. Thus, while it is tempting to construct a narrative in which Laurencin was the victim of a patriarchal corps of critics and jealous female peers, it is important to keep in mind that she was complicit in the construction her image as the ideal “feminine” artist. It is therefore not surprising that feminist scholars have struggled to construct a redemptive reading of her work.


Early attempts on the part of feminist scholars to recuperate Laurencin’s role as artist often continued to reaffirm the notion of an essential femininity that both Laurencin and her early critics put forth. The first of these was the monograph written in 1977 by Charlotte Gere entitled Marie Laurencin. In her text, Gere propagates the notion that Laurencin worked alongside her male counterparts, yet remained entirely independent of them. She writes, “Marie Laurencin’s greatest strength lay in her ability to resist the pressures of her surroundings which, in the case of one of weaker vision or a less instinctive approach, would have led her into becoming a Cubist or Dadaist camp-follower.”32 She accepts at face value Laurencin’s statements that her work was instinctive as opposed to conceptually based. She also affirms Douglas Cooper’s assertion that the only reason Laurencin was associated with the Cubist

32 Gere, 7.
movement was because of her social links to its practitioners.\(^{33}\) One of the first feminist art historians to address Laurencin’s work, Gere lays a foundation for the rhetoric of isolation that has since become a standard reading of the artist. She associates Laurencin’s apparent independence with strength, celebrating Laurencin’s “femininity” rather than examining this ideal critically.\(^{34}\)

The tendency to discuss Laurencin’s style as “feminine” without addressing the implications of this approach persisted in subsequent years. In 1989, the first exhibition of Laurencin’s work in the United States was held at the Birmingham Museum of Art. The accompanying text, written by Douglas Hyland and Heather McPherson, also puts forth a more or less essentialist reading of Laurencin’s artistic output. The authors state that “Laurencin’s principal strength or weakness, depending on one’s point of view, lies in her stubborn refusal to suppress or transcend her individual feminine consciousness.”\(^ {35}\) According to this interpretation, Laurencin’s refusal to suppress her innate femininity (rather than her intellect or creative genius) is what marks her as unique. The problematic nature of this approach is made evident in the authors’ handling of Laurencin’s artist-group portraits. They argue that *Apollinaire and his Friends* (1909) can be interpreted as Laurencin’s response to Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*.

\(^{33}\) Douglas Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*. (New York: Phaidon, 1971). This theme of artistic isolation continues when discussing Laurencin’s association with Dadaist circles she makes a similar observation, claiming that “…she remained untouched by Dada influence, and her work shows no trace of this contact with one of the most daring artistic innovators like [Francis Picabia].” 100.

\(^{34}\) Renee Sandell, ”Marie Laurencin: Cubist Muse or More?” *Women's Art Journal* 1, no. 1 (1980): 23-27. In her article Sandell continues to maintain this image of Laurencin’s isolation but in a different way. She argues that Laurencin was influenced by the avant-garde ideologies argued her. However, rather than examining the visual evidence of this in detail, Sandell’s primary interest is to identify the various injustices that Laurencin suffered as a female painter. Mainly, that she was considered a muse rather than an independent artist. Sandell’s exaggerated emphasis on the negative aspects of Laurencin’s male relationships continues to propagate an image of her as an isolated or outsider figure, in spite of Sandell’s claims otherwise.

(1907), and that Laurencin’s painting “paraphrases and gentrifies Picasso’s Demoiselles, [and] substitutes Laurencin herself—demurely seated, in a pale blue dress—for the most brutally reconstructed demoiselle.” The choice to use the term “gentrified” seems of particular significance here. It suggests that Laurencin’s rendition of the painting might somehow take Picasso’s radical work and make it palatable—less radical and confrontational, more bourgeois and socially acceptable, thus more conventionally feminine. In spite of their best efforts, Hyland and McPherson have rendered Laurencin’s “Cubist” works, once again, merely derivative of her male counterparts.

Unlike these other early texts on Laurencin, Julia Fagan-King’s essay “United on the Threshold of the Twentieth-Century Mystical Ideal: Marie Laurencin’s Integral Involvement with the Intimates of the Bateau-Lavoir” takes seriously the possibility that Laurencin’s approach to her paintings was conceptual rather than instinctive. Focusing her analysis on *Apollinaire and His Friends*, Fagan-King argues that the program for the painting is rooted in a Rosicrucian Judeo-Christian mysticism of interest to both Laurencin and Apollinaire. She identifies several of the figures as biblical allegories: Apollinaire as a Christ type, Laurencin as the Virgin Mary (identified by her blue gown), and Picasso as John the Baptist. Fagan-King’s detailed reading of the work, and her close attention to its iconographic references, provide a methodological

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36 Ibid., 25.


38 Noting the reference to Botticelli’s *Primavera*, Fagan-King observes that for Laurencin (and Apollinaire) the choice to represent the group of three at the left of the canvas would have fulfilled the neo-platonic ideal of the three graces. According to Fagan-King, Stein represents the embodiment of intellect, Olivier as the symbol of corporeal pleasure, and Gillot the perfect blending of the two ideals. Perhaps the most radical in Fagan-Kings interpretation, she argues that the female figure to the right of Picasso might be Laurencin’s mother, Pauline Laurencin. The two lived together in this period and were notably close. While formally the female figure does resemble an earlier portrait of Pauline, there is little else to suggest that Laurencin intended to include her mother in this group portrait that otherwise exclusively depicts her professional contemporaries.
model for the current study, as does her attempt to assign Laurencin a degree of artistic and creative agency. However, Fagan-King’s interpretation is entirely predicated on Apollinaire’s poetry. There is little information to suggest that Laurencin was as deeply invested in the cult of Rosicrucianism as Apollinaire. While it is possible that Laurencin and Apollinaire were both inspired by elements of mystical Christian symbolism, there are also significant issues of identity and gender at play in *Apollinaire and His Friends* that Fagan-King’s reading cannot accommodate.

The question that all of these interpretations seem to beg is whether one may discuss the influence that men like Apollinaire and Picasso might have had on Laurencin’s work without thereby sacrificing her artistic and intellectual agency. Also, it would seem that Laurencin’s play with the signifiers of femininity, contrast enough with later notions of feminism that scholars have struggled to understand her work as strategically engaged with notions of gender, rather than as simply celebrating “the feminine.” Ultimately, then, this generation of scholars did not move beyond the framework established by early criticism and by Laurencin herself.

**From the Singular to the Plural: Laurencin among Women Artists, 1990-2011**

A series of recent texts place Laurencin in a fuller context, integrating her career into larger surveys of women artists working in Paris during the 1910s and 20s. However, even in these broader accounts, Laurencin is portrayed as somewhat singular, marginalized from the groups of women artists discussed. Gill Perry’s *Women Artists of the Parisian Avant-Garde* (1995) and Paula Birnbaum’s *Women Artists of Interwar France* (2010) both recuperate an entire generation of thriving female avant-garde painters, and map out the all-female artistic networks
established in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{39} Perry’s text focuses on the work of women artists from 1900 to 1920, with special emphasis on the work of Laurencin’s contemporary Émilie Charmy and the Union of Women Painters and Sculptors. Birnbaum picks up where Perry leaves off, centering her study around the Femmes Artistes Modernes (or FAM), a second, and more experimental exhibition group for women artists. While both discuss Laurencin’s work in detail, both also tend use Laurencin as a foil against which to compare the work of other women artists, whose work and life fit more easily into the image of this generation of women artists that each scholar endeavors to construct.

Perry undertakes the task of providing a survey of women artists loosely affiliated with the so-called “School of Paris”: she discusses the work of Charmy, Suzanne Valadon, and several other women painters from the period in the context of the larger socio-historical circumstances in which they worked. In her chapter entitled “The Art Market and the School of Paris: Marketing a ‘Feminine Style,’” Perry takes issue with the labeling of Laurencin as a Cubist, given that other female artists, including Marevna (Marie Vorobieff) and Alice Halicka, adopted a more visibly “Cubist” style, with paintings featuring fractured, planar geometric shapes. Perry does not take into consideration the dramatic shifts that occurred in these avant-garde circles over a short time span. As I discuss in chapter two, Laurencin was working with Picasso and Braque in the years that preceded the establishment of a codified Cubist “style.” Laurencin’s portraits are in fact quite stylistically similar to many of Picasso’s proto-Cubist portraits, such as his \textit{Gertrude Stein} of 1906 or his self-portraits from around the same period (Fig 10). The fact that Laurencin subsequently did not develop her aesthetic in the same direction as Picasso and

Braque does not discount her engagement with the same set of ideologies. In addition, Perry points out that Laurencin is mentioned more frequently in art-historical accounts than her less financially and critically successful female peers. Perry suggests that Laurencin specifically cultivated an easily marketable style, and that because of this; her work lacks a serious investment in modernist conceptual principles. In Perry’s reading, Laurencin’s success came at the cost of the legitimacy of her art:

Through her work and projected self-image Laurencin helped to consolidate an image of a marketable ‘feminine’ art, inhabited by *femmes-enfants*, and produced by the quintessentially ‘feminine’ artist. In seeking to make a living as a woman artist, she sought to capitalize on the success of this form of femininity. She thus chose to pursue a public role, and to develop a form of painting, which ensured (rather than simply encouraged) a separate classification from that of her male colleagues.40

Perry reads Laurencin’s conflation of her public identity and her art as a marketing tactic to appeal to her audience, rather than a way to address the gendered nature of her relationship to the larger avant-garde. She assumes that the artist’s practice of self-othering was nothing more than a way to secure her career.

In her survey of women artists working in the inter-war period, Paula Birnbaum provides a significantly more detailed and nuanced analysis of Laurencin’s working practice as well as her public and professional identity. However, in the end, Birnbaum’s conclusion resembles Perry’s: she also takes issue with Laurencin’s commercial success, concluding that her utilization of a “feminine” style constituted a retreat from the pressure of working in a male-dominated art market. Birnbaum links Laurencin’s apparent retreat from avant-gardism to the concept of masquerade, in one of the most sophisticated readings of the artist’s “feminine” style and self-
image. As Birnbaum relates, in 1929 psychoanalyst Joan Rivière posited a theory of masquerade whereby professional women adopt an exaggerated façade of femininity when confronted with the tension between their public identities and the social expectations for more traditional womanliness. She sees Laurencin’s celebratory treatment of idealized female bodies as an example of this theory in action. Like Perry, then, Birnbaum ultimately paints a picture of Laurencin in which the latter’s appropriation of a “feminine” vocabulary is a more or less mercenary move as opposed to an ideological or critical choice.\(^{41}\)

Laurencin the “Misfit”: Feminisms and Sexualities, 1994-2013

Recently scholars have begun to look for new avenues through which to access Laurencin’s life and work, considering them together without collapsing the differences between the two. Such is the case in Elizabeth Louise Kahn’s biography titled Marie Laurencin: ‘Une Femme Inadaptée’ in Feminist Histories of Art (2013). As the title of her text suggests, Kahn continues the trend of considering Laurencin a “misfit” or “ill-adapted” woman; in this case, though, she does so in order to embrace what the author calls the “crooked” (or non-hetero-normative) elements of her life and career.\(^{42}\) Though Kahn takes an essentially biographical approach, she does not organize her narrative in a strictly chronological manner: because her intent is to construct an alternative biography for Laurencin, she organizes her text thematically.

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\(^{41}\) Birnbaum and Perry both use Laurencin as a foil – comparing her to other female painters from the same period that fit more easily into their respective definitions of adequate female artists of the moment. Birnbaum writes that: “In considering Laurencin’s painting as part of an extensive practice of self-representation conceived before her career had unfolded, we can begin to appreciate her ambition to achieve public recognition.” She also states that: “Thinking about Laurencin’s artistic practice in terms of Rivière’s theory of masquerade, it seems that in response to the competition from male painters and poets in the cubist circle, Laurencin turned toward her own femininity as an accepted and static state of being. (99)

\(^{42}\) Kahn, 1-41. Kahn discusses this interpretation of Laurencin’s life in her first chapter, entitled “The Not-So-Straight Biography.”
She first discusses Laurencin’s relationships with men: Apollinaire, Picasso, Salmon and André Mare. She then goes on to discuss Laurencin in terms of her female relationships, such as those with Nicole Groult and Gertrude Stein.

However, while Kahn’s text is valuable in complicating our understanding of Laurencin’s personal history, in terms of her analysis of the art itself, she runs the risk of overgeneralization. Kahn’s interpretation of the available biographic record of Laurencin’s life pushes the bounds of revisionist history to the extreme, so that she can construct a narrative of a lifelong progression toward a lesbian identity.\(^\text{43}\) Kahn states that she does not want to box Laurencin in with labels, yet throughout her text she consistently claims a “lesbian identity” for the artist. For example, she suggests in her chapter titled “Laurencin’s Men of the Avant-Garde” that Laurencin’s relationship with Apollinaire was a sexless one, and that both Picasso and Apollinaire may have been sexually abusing Laurencin.\(^\text{44}\) It would seem that in order to address Laurencin’s female romantic encounters, the author feels pressed to erase her relationships with men. Thus although Kahn’s text complicates the Laurencin discourse, it falls short of fully addressing the many roles that Laurencin actively played in her lifetime.\(^\text{45}\)

\(^\text{43}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{44}\) This interpretation contrasts dramatically with the typical narrative, which describes Laurencin and Apollinaire as extremely close and their relationship as an intense one. Some scholars have written that the two lived together from 1909 to 1910 and some maintain that the two never cohabitated, but in neither case the legitimacy of their relationship is never questions. What’s more, in an equally suppositional move, it is often suggested that Picasso and Laurencin may have slept together at one point or another. How we are intended to deal with these oppositional accounts I am not sure. But it seems that they highlight the ridiculous and counterproductive nature of making such suggestions without any evidence to support them.

\(^\text{45}\) What analysis Kahn does provide of Laurencin’s work is limited and cursory at best. For example, in her reading of *Apollinaire and His Friends*, which I will address at length in chapter three, Kahn makes the case that Laurencin uses the group portrait to actively construct a lesbian identity for herself, stating that: “This Laurencin is both the director of and the performer in a play about her own location in the confines of the avant-garde, and embedded in the dialogue is the voice of a woman who sees through the artifice of her newly achieved professional identity. The masquerading femininity in this picture may have enabled her to negotiate another problematic identity in the making, that of a lesbian existence. The work compels me to question its subversive, that is, its confrontational discourse direct at heterosexual traditions of representation.” Ibid., 26.
Where Kahn, like many of her predecessors, focuses on Laurencin’s biography, Bridget Elliott, in a series of texts published between 1994 and 200 relates the artist’s decorative, “feminine” style to the notion of the male artist-genius and the homoerotic possibilities of her later works. Given that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to separate the artist’s public identity from discussions of her painting, Elliott treats both together in a way that privileges the sophisticated subtlety of Marie Laurencin’s artistic endeavors. Elliott’s 1996 article “The ‘Strength of the Weak’ As Portrayed by Marie Laurencin” unpacks the variety of factors that contributed to Laurencin’s marginalization in the current discourse, addressing the issue of Laurencin’s problematic relationship to feminist art history. Elliott argues that the artist’s relationship to the various avant-gardisms with which she was associated was constantly shifting, in part thanks to her dual identities as woman and artist. She claims that it is critical to understand Laurencin’s treatment of the female body when looking at her work, observing that Laurencin’s “depictions of active and relatively un-fragmented female subjects need not be viewed as naively essentialist an compromising, but instead can be seen as tactical incursions into avant-garde space.” In this way, Elliott creates a framework through which a degree of agency might be returned to the artist, predicated on the acknowledgement of her work as tactical and self-conscious, rather than naïve or self-indulgent.

Elliott also dissects the feminizing rhetoric of Laurencin’s critics and supporters, looking to the writings of Allard, Salmon and Apollinaire, but with an eye to Laurencin’s complicit involvement in her own feminization. She discusses the problematic nature of Laurencin’s

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47 Ibid., 12
commercial work as a society portraitist and her popular success, observing that both have caused modern-day art historians (like Perry, for example) to question the legitimacy of the artist’s endeavors. Elliott suggests that it was her financial success that afforded Laurencin a unique degree of freedom, and sees the more overtly homoerotic tones of her late paintings as an expression of this liberty. She ends by pointing to the articulation of homoerotic desire in Laurencin’s late paintings. Elliott observes that there is a subtlety to Laurencin’s feminist commentary on the female experience that has been lost over time. She writes, “Never highly visible in the first place, [her subversive gestures] easily fade into the background. What remains is only the shell of social conformity that housed them.”

Elliott calls for a reconsideration of the way Laurencin’s work may both affirm and resist the patriarchal structure of avant-garde practice and self-definition.

The breadth of issues that Elliott draws out in this one short article makes evident, however, the complexity of such a task—for to find such subversive elements in Laurencin’s work, one must take into consideration issues of sexuality and gender difference; the rhetoric of critics; Laurencin’s relationship to other avant-garde artists; as well as a plethora of socio-historical contexts. In her subsequently-published chapter “Arabesque: Marie Laurencin, Decadence and Decorative Excess,” Elliott implements this type of nuanced analysis more fully. She examines Laurencin’s deployment of the arabesque motif throughout her career, from her 1908 painting Diana at the Hunt to her a commission in 1950 for an illustrated volume of Sappho’s poems, commissioned by Natalie Barney (Fig 11 & 12). Elliott characterizes the arabesque, historically associated with the decorative arts, as a signifier of femininity and as a tool through which Laurencin subverted traditional femininity; observing that critics of the day

\[48\] Ibid., 14
interpreted her works as decorative and lacking in depth, but also, on occasion, threatening to traditional social structures. For Elliott, the arabesque highlights the way that meaning in Laurencin’s work is not simple and declarative, but rather unfixed, changing in relation to circumstances and over time. She also acknowledges that when Laurencin’s work is inserted into existing formulae for feminist interpretation, significant elements of her particular approach to the subject of gender are missed. Her approach highlights the need for a study of Laurencin’s specific experience living and working as a female artist and surrounded by a specific group of people, with a particular socio-economic background and sexual identity that shaped her perspective.

Clearly, a wide range of issues must be taken into consideration in order to bring Laurencin’s contributions to modernism to light. Looking forward, it is productive to consider other scholarship on women artists that might model a way to reinsert Laurencin’s work into its original context and, by extension, to examine the implications of her style and gestures as their original audiences may have understood them. Looking to alternative modes of feminist analysis, I turn to the example of Anne Wagner’s *Three Artists (Three Women)* (1996). In this text, Wagner presents three case studies of American women artists, each in partnership with a famous male artist: Georgia O’Keeffe, Lee Krasner, and Eva Hesse. Wagner’s modus operandi throughout her study is to consider the work of each of these artists not merely as women artists who might be lumped together in a unified experience of patriarchal subjugation and marginalization. Instead, she argues that the work of each was conditioned by their respective experiences as women, but also by issues of class, geography, politics and their respective awareness and handling of their own gender–their “otherness.” Essentially, Wagner advocates for the unfixing of the position of womanhood. She writes that:
If we take twentieth-century discourses on “Woman,” “the feminine,” even the “female,” as naming not only a position – one particularly unfixed yet closely regulated – but also thoughts and perceptions to which women themselves fall heir despite themselves, there are necessary consequences for a notion of working “as woman.” Making art from such a position is inevitably rhetorical; it must often be strategic, just often employ assertion, denial, tactical evasion, subterfuge, deception, and refusal. To the reader already initiated into even a handful of writings about the twentieth-century, these strategies may sound like a familiar enough catalogues. They are among the devices of modernism – or better, the modernisms – in which these artists eventually made a place for themselves.49

The link that Wagner draws between the skills of navigation necessitated by the experience of being a woman artist, and those of the modernist artist, can be applied directly to the work of Laurencin to great effect. For, as Elliot has shown, it becomes apparent that Laurencin was willing and able to deploy tactics of modernism to simultaneously position herself as an avant-gardist while also navigating and commenting on the circumstance of her gender. With this approach, it becomes possible to attribute to Laurencin a sophisticated awareness of, and control over, the presentation of her gender image. Furthermore, Wagner’s recognition that the conceptual tenets of modernism might function as a tool for the woman artist, rather than a hindrance, helps us to see how Laurencin used Cubism and the other “isms” of her day to her own advantage. Wagner lays the groundwork for a new understanding of Laurencin’s particular brand of “strange feminism.”50

An attempt to relate Laurencin’s work to feminism is important for two key reasons. First, it helps to recuperate the image of an important, prolific, and highly successful artist whose marginalization distorts the historical record. Secondly, in taking seriously the strategic nature of

49 Wagner, 289.

50 Todd, 92. In her interview, Mary Todd cannily observes that “To Marie Laurencin all the activities of everyday life, all political or economic movements are listed under the general heading of ‘masculine affairs’ – and yest she is a feminist, probably the strangest feminist the world has ever seen.”
her work, we might broaden our definition of feminism, changing the image of what feminism, subversion, and agency can look like. In this way, finding both the feminism and avant-gardism in Laurencin’s works creates a space for a new dialogue about what it means to be an artist whose work has or makes a feminist politics.
CHAPTER 2

THE MASK: THE CUBISM OF MARIE LAURENCIN’S GROUP OF ARTISTS

This chapter focuses on the first of Laurencin’s two group portraits, Group of Artists (Fig. 1), in which the artist presents four interrelated figures. Guillaume Apollinaire is seated at center, holding a book; to his left stands Laurencin herself, clutching a rose. Below them, we see the figures of Pablo Picasso and his then-mistress Fernande Olivier. The four are set against a blank background, with contextual details to suggest a specific or believable location. The only elements present in the work other than the artists themselves are a vase of flowers placed just above Olivier’s head, and Picasso’s little dog Fricka, seated to his right. What are we to make of this congregation of figures, gathered under the label “group of artists”?  

This work has received the most critical attention among the many portraits Laurencin made over her long career. However, to date, the painting has been discussed almost exclusively in biographical terms, as a kind of who’s-who, or even a “Where’s Waldo?” of Parisian modernism. Such an approach takes the work as a more or less declarative or factual statement, rather than a complex, and even contradictory, representation of Laurencin and her relations to the other figures depicted. I believe that the seeming simplicity of this work, both in terms of its style and its subject matter, masks the complexity of Laurencin’s objectives in painting it. This chapter offers a reading that sees more in Group of Artists than a direct transcription of Laurencin’s own literal relationship with her friends and peers.

Arguably, though, Group of Artists does invite us to interpret the painting at least partly in biographical terms, insofar as it directly places her in a network of well-known members of the Parisian avant-garde. The fact that the painting was purchased by Gertrude Stein and folded

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51 Although the history of how the painting acquired its name is unclear, what it was referred to as the Group of Artists, soon after it entered into the Stein collection. Whether or not this was a title assigned by Laurencin herself, it is clear that this is how the visitors to the Stein home would have known it.
into her now-famous collection in her apartment on the Rue de Fleurus affirms this, for both the figures in the work, and its initial primary audience, were members of the same insular community. Moreover, because Laurencin includes Picasso and Apollinaire—figures more famous than she, both then and now—the significance of Laurencin’s presence among this group of artists too often goes unexplored. Is Laurencin aligning herself with the two well-known male artists depicted around her—as an avant-gardist among her peers? Or is Laurencin casting herself as the feminized muse to these two “great men”? Are these two readings of Laurencin compatible, or are they in tension with one another?

As I note in Chapter one, one way of construing Laurencin’s self-representation in Group of Artists would draw upon Joan Rivière’s theory of the “feminine masquerade.” In the simplest terms, Rivière suggests that female artists exaggerate, or perform, stereotypically feminine traits in order to resolve the conflict between their dual, and apparently conflicting, roles: as artist and as woman. The emphasis in the existing Laurencin scholarship on this hyper-feminine component of her work ends with the assumption that such a performance must have been an appeal to her (specifically male) audience. This approach helpfully clarifies one way of construing Laurencin’s image, though it does not exhaust the possible interpretations of her self-representation in this canvas.

In what follows, I extrapolate from post-structuralist interpretations of Picasso’s Cubist paintings to re-examine Laurencin’s experimentation with the genre of portraiture in this early phase of her career, and to put that experimentation in dialogue with Picasso’s during this crucial period in the formation of Cubism. The Group of Artists was produced in what is sometimes

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52 Elliott and Wallace.

53 Rivière, 304.
referred to as Laurencin’s “Cubist period,” but the true meaning of that label has yet to be fully addressed. Rather than viewing Laurencin’s work either as wholly separate from, or simply derivative of, Picasso’s, I explore the nuanced formal and conceptual relations between their work, focusing specifically on the ways both artists use portraits to investigate the relation of pictorial signs to gendered identity. Laurencin, I argue, mobilized the strategies of early Cubist portraiture to help her navigate the particular challenges she faced as a woman artist in a male-dominated avant-garde. In making this argument, I address the complex question of Laurencin’s “feminism” as opposed to the apparently “feminine” qualities of her work, while disclosing her sophisticated, and strategic engagement with an avant-garde culture subsequently celebrated only in relation to her male peers.

The elements that affiliate Group of Artists with Cubism have so far been overlooked in part because Laurencin does not employ the angular, fractured planes usually associated with that style. But to look for such stylistic similarities is to miss what I believe is a more fundamental congruity between Laurencin’s work and Picasso’s. In Group of Artists, Laurencin engages with various aspects of Cubism, as it existed in 1908: abstraction by way of stylistic simplification; the quotation of other artists’ styles; play with the differential nature of pictorial signs; and inventive use of the mask motif.\textsuperscript{54} Deployed together in the genre of the group portrait, we can see that these elements help Laurencin to resist a single or stable meaning: no one explanation encompasses the full range of signification mobilized by these four figures as Laurencin rendered them here. In this way, Group of Artists not only employs a version of Cubism, but also makes self-conscious commentary on, and carefully stages its own relationship to, Cubism itself, then the dominant movement within the Bateau-Lavoir circle. In implementing

\textsuperscript{54} Such elements were also integral to Picasso’s proto-cubist portraiture practice of the same period and can be understood as elements of the Cubist style as it was understood c. 1908.
a Cubist play with signification within the genre of the group portrait, Laurencin produced works that could address her specific situation as a female avant-gardist in a mostly male milieu.

By applying post-structuralism to Laurencin’s group portraits, this chapter explores the formal and conceptual interests she shared with Picasso in the years 1905-1909. Critical to my interpretation of these works is an acknowledgment of the Bateau-Lavoir group’s commitment to portraiture in this originary moment of Cubism. The portrait was a fundamental component of Cubist practice at that time, and was of primary interest to both Laurencin and Picasso in the period when the two were most closely associated. Both artists use the portrait as a vehicle to investigate the ways in which pictorial signs can convey or mask the identity of the sitter (or sitters, in group portraits such as Laurencin’s). This analysis reveals that what set Laurencin apart from her male compatriots was not an inherently different approach to her artistic practice. Rather, it was her unique position as a female painter to use Cubism to investigate gender identity and female experience that distinguished her from other painters in her orbit.

As Group of Artists conveys, at this early point Laurencin affirmatively opted to align herself with the male-dominated avant-garde, rather than defining herself within existing communities of female artists such as the Union of Women Painters or the FAM. At the same time, her affiliation with the largely male Bateau-Lavoir circle demanded that she perpetually reassert her own legitimacy as an artist. Doing so meant that she had to contend with the conventional association of the woman as object rather than subject; in particular, she had to negotiate her role as an idealized embodiment of femininity for her romantic partner Apollinaire.

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55 This predated the period when Braque and Picasso were financially supported by Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler and were working in a much more closed circle. In these early years of Cubism the Picasso studio was open to a select group, which included Laurencin. The fact that in some accounts (such as Fernande Olivier’s memoirs) Laurencin posed as one of the figures in the Demoiselles alludes to her access to his work in its developing stages.
and even other men such as Picasso. She had to play a variety of roles, and this constant shifting of identities is the principle that animates *Group of Artists*.

**Cubist Portraiture: From Mimesis to Masking**

Laurencin’s work has, in the past, been read as separate from Cubism in part because we largely do not see the signature elements of the latter (geometric stylization, fractured planes, and a monochromatic palette) in her oeuvre. However, a critical first step in recognizing how Laurencin was Cubist is to position her work within the specific context of Cubism as it was understood and practiced in 1907-1908—particularly in relation to Cubist portraiture, a major genre during those years.\(^5\) For Laurencin as well as Picasso, it is through experimentation with the representation of human identity that the conceptual ideologies of their respective practices were developed, allowing each of them to form sophisticated stylistic approaches that were related but not identical.

The self-portrait, specifically, was a key subject for both Laurencin and Picasso in their early careers, because the genre allowed both artists to directly address their professional identities while also experimenting with modernist style. As I note above, Laurencin would eventually become famous for a homogeneous approach to her portraits of women that is conflated with her own public identity as the so-called “elfin-woman.”\(^5\) This uniformity is often overlooked as mere simplicity for the sake of a marketable style, when in fact this practice is a key component of her approach to portraiture and her efforts to conflate her own image with that of her figures. While Picasso, on the other hand, rarely painted himself after 1915, if we expand


\(^5\) Birnbaum, 98.
our definition of self-portraiture to include what Kirk Varnedoe calls the “teeming horde of surrogates—the carnival of harlequins, minotaurs, and musketeers—into which Picasso continually projected self-references,” then we can see that a continual practice of self-representation and self-definition was as intrinsic to Picasso’s practice as to Laurencin’s. A comparison of Laurencin and Picasso’s earliest self-portraits reveals this mutual quest to construct artistic identities through this genre. A strong sense of psychological intensity is evident in Picasso’s early Self-Portrait of 1900 (Fig. 13). The sketch features a tightly-cropped, frontal view of the artist, whose eyes peer confrontationally out at the viewer. The sketchy, expressive use of line, particularly in the background, enhances the intensity of the work and the access it appears to give us to the artist’s subjectivity. Comparing this to a series of self-portraits that Laurencin painted around the same period, we see an almost identical format. Her Self-Portrait of 1904 also features a close-up, frontal view of the artist’s face, and an expressive handling of paint communicates and a strong sense of emotionality (Fig. 14). A 1905 self-portrait shifts from the confrontational frontal presentation to a three-quarter view, but her challenging expression and bold gaze parallel markedly with Picasso’s (Fig. 15). This comparison reveals two young artists, each avid to present themselves to the world through the vehicle of self-portraiture. Paula Birnbaum notes that in Laurencin’s work of this period she seems to “emulate the European male traditions of mastery and psychological introspection rather than maintaining popular codes of feminine decorum.” She reads Laurencin’s choice of pose and style as a direct alignment with the male image of the artist-genius. In the earliest stages of her career, then, we

58 Varnedoe,111. This contrasts with the typical image of Laurencin that was proliferated in Apollinaire’s writing of the essential and wholly feminine.

59 Birnbaum, 99.
see that Laurencin, like Picasso, looked to her male predecessors; she assertively compared herself to, and aligned herself with, such “great” artists.\textsuperscript{60}

However, by 1908, both Laurencin and Picasso’s style had shifted dramatically, adopting new avant-garde formal vocabularies in their work, including their portraits. One of the most important motifs to appear in avant-garde portraits of this period was that of the mask; an overview of Picasso’s use of the mask helps to clarify Laurencin’s treatment of the same theme. In 1906, Picasso’s aesthetic changed dramatically; he later attributed this shift to his encounter with Iberian mask imagery.\textsuperscript{61} The first evidence of this shift is seen in his \textit{Portrait of Gertrude Stein} (1906; Fig. 10). I will address the implications of the mask motif in the work of both Laurencin and Picasso at length later in this chapter; for the moment, it is critical to recognize the entry of this motif into Picasso’s and Laurencin’s portraits at around the same time, and the way that this motif allowed avant-garde painters new ways to approach the practice of portraiture.

While the Stein portrait is the most frequently discussed example of Picasso’s “masked” portraits, he also applied the mask motif to his own visage in his 1906 \textit{Self-Portrait with Palette} (Fig. 16). The painting once again proclaims his status as an artist, with palette in hand. What is striking when looking at this work in comparison to his earlier self-portraits is the absence of psychological “depth.”\textsuperscript{62} The heavy-lidded eyes refuse to engage with the viewer while the minimalist style of the masked face frustrates the desire to extract any “truth” about the artist’s

\textsuperscript{60} Scholars have linked Picasso’s self-portraits of this period to the self-portraits of Rembrandt, while this connection has not been extended to Laurencin’s work, it seems to apply, if not more so to her as well. Just prior to 1906 both artists were producing portraits that were decidedly more “expressive” in style in which the facial features of their figures were much less defined. This hints at an early, shared interest in the abstraction of the traditional portrait. The episode with the Iberian mask seemed to provide a visual rhetoric needed to take this practice to the next level.


\textsuperscript{62} Even in early 1906 Picasso was still drawing his own face with the same mimetic and psychological intensity that is seen in the portrait form 1900.
identity from the work. Yet another example of Picasso’s masking can be seen in his early 1907 portrait of the poet Max Jacob, another member of the Bateau-Lavoir circle (Fig. 17). This rough, sketchy gouache on cardboard is evocative of the linear noses and almond eyes of Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon, also produced in 1907 (Fig. 18). Both works are examples of Picasso’s developing Cubist style in this period, tied deeply to the mask motif.

Laurencin also experimented with the motif of the mask almost as soon as she came into contact with the Bateau-Lavoir group. She met Georges Braque at the Académie Humbert in 1907; through him, she was introduced to Picasso, Apollinaire, Olivier, and the rest of their circle. In 1908, she produced a portrait of Max Jacob that appears to take the appropriation of Iberian sculpture one step further than Picasso (Fig. 19). Here we have Jacob’s head, suspended against a brown background. He is bodiless, hairless and expressionless. His downturned mouth is suggested with only a thin line. The signature almond-shaped eyes, and the extended line that connotes both brow-bone and the extension of a long, angular nose tie this representation to Picasso’s. In both cases, if the painting were not titled Portrait of Max Jacob, the viewer would have little way of identifying the figure as a portrait of Jacob at all.

Beyond its function as a technique of abstraction, the mask has further implications in terms of the relationship between the sitter and artist when it is applied to a portrait of a known figure. Tamar Garb’s observations on the role of the mask help to clarify its role:

If portraiture’s purview had, for centuries, been tied up with the specific, the idiosyncratic and the minutely observed, then the generalizations and abstractions from Archaic and African heads and masks stood for its antithesis. Tied less to the unique than the typical, less to the mimetic than the conceptual, masks were, in effect, anti-portraits, offering substitute carved countenances of people and gods, or disguises and assumed personae, personifications and symbolizations, which when used in ritual ceremonies, would hide the wearers, not reproduce their features.63

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Picasso mobilized this conception of the mask as an anti-portrait, one that shielded the truth of a sitter’s identity from the viewer rather than revealing it. In 1937, he acknowledged to Jacob that part of what he appreciated about he carved African masks he saw in Spain was their ability to protect the wearer from the gaze of others. Malcolm Warner observes, “both the mask as concealer and the mask as revealer posit a ‘true’ identity of the wearer. Each function ‘protects’ the masked-wearer by acknowledging the integrity of the individual and preserving it. But identity may be borrowed as well.” According to this conceit, the “truth” that is visible in the painting of a sitter whose face has been masked is revealed not through the mimetic physiology of their face, but by the frank acknowledgement that their true character cannot be captured on the canvas. It also shifts the primary responsibility for the construction of the identity of the sitter in a modernist (we might say here, “Cubist”) portrait, from the artist, to the viewer.

Both Laurencin’s and Picasso’s portraits of Jacob exemplify the shift in approaches to portraiture in the early twentieth century, as abstracting tendencies came to the fore. Prior to the turn of the twentieth century, the tradition of portraiture in European art was inextricably tied to resemblance and mimesis. The essential purpose of the portrait was to recreate and present to the viewer the physical resemblance of the sitter as a means of delivering (or appearing to deliver) to the viewer the former’s emotional, intellectual, and psychological world, as in the case of one of the most famous examples of this tradition, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s portrait of Louis-Francois Bertin (1832; Fig. 20). The idiosyncratic and un-idealized figure of Bertin


65 While the portrait of Bertin serves as a good example of a work that was apparently constructed to resemble the viewer, Ingres’s portraiture practice also serves as a precedent to Laurencin’s in more complex ways. His distortions of the body and his conflation of individual female sitters with symbolic and allegorical references demonstrates that although portraiture has traditionally been understood as a record of the sitters true appearance, some artists, like Ingres, complicate this narrative.
communicates a sense of documentary authority to the viewer; the intense gaze and detailed physiognomy create a strong illusion of psychological presence. Even later, more abstracting works, such as Vincent van Gogh’s self-portraits, although highly stylized, retain some degree of mimetic resemblance and psychological presence (Fig. 21). In the case of Laurencin’s portrait of Max Jacob, nearly all such signifiers are stripped away; they are replaced with a mask that prevents the viewer from extrapolating from the image any illusion that the surface or internal “truth” of the sitter has been captured on the canvas. Such a gesture seems antithetical to the very nature of portraiture itself. The question must be asked why both Laurencin and Picasso (and many other artists in this period) were so invested in such a seemingly paradoxical practice. An answer might be that portraiture provided an opportunity for artists to construct their own identities, and to investigate identity itself and its relation to the painted image.

The Gender Politics of Laurencin’s Artist-Group Portrait

In order tease out the various claims to identity that Laurencin makes in her Group of Artists, it is critical to understand the significance of her turn to the artist-group portrait: her choice of subject is charged simply through its engagement with that tradition. In her analysis of Henri de Fantin-Latour’s group portraits, such as his 1870 painting A Studio in Les Batignolles (Fig. 22), which depicts members of what came to be known as the Impressionist circle, Bridget Alsdorf observes that dynamics of power circulate within the painting, as each figure’s identity is

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66 The rise of photography and access to camera equipment certainly had a significant impact on portraiture. There was no longer any need for painted portraits to serve as documentary objects to retain or communicate the physical likeness of the sitter. Alsdorf discusses this shift at length in her book. Arguably this opened a door that allowed artists to delve into the conceptual relationship between the sitter, artist and viewer that might not otherwise have been explored.
determined in relation to the other figures present in the work. This format took on a particular charge in the late-nineteenth century with the decline of the Academy. As institutionalized parameters for artistic identity carried less weight, painters like Fantin-Latour sought to affiliate with other artists as a means of self-definition. These group portraits all manifest a constant tension between individual and collective identity. As Alsdorf writes,

when portraits of specific individuals are deliberately combined within the frame of a picture, regardless of the degree of compositional harmony in their arrangement, some form of mutual identification is strongly implied. The tableau is meant to transcend the constitutive individuals, although formed out of the relationships and charged spaces the artist established between them.

The group, as Alsdorf reminds us, was a necessity, needed in order to understand and to broadcast one’s position within the larger art world; but a group affiliation also threatened one’s claim to creative individuality and genius. This tension is encoded in the formal structure of Fantin’s group portrait: each artist is visibly isolated from the others in ways echoed in Laurencin’s Group of Artists.

Laurencin’s decision to engage in the tradition of the avant-garde group portrait is quite telling, for if we compare her painting with these precedents, we can see clearly that the genre historically is defined in male terms. Group of Artists contains the same tension between self-definition and collective association that we see in Fantin-Latour’s work, but with the added layer of gendered distinctions and significations. Considering the ambivalent and often contradictory attitudes toward the female artist in the early twentieth century, it is of little

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68 Gustave Courbet’s ambitious 1855 painting *The Painter’s Studio: A Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life* is yet another example of a work from this period in which an artist presents a carefully constructed statement of his own identity in relation to those around him.

69 Ibid., 66.
surprise that Laurencin turned to the group portrait to construct a visual manifesto, serving as a statement of her own self-definition vis-à-vis Cubism. For, among all of the avant-garde movements of this period, Cubism was the one with the fewest female adherents.

In part, we may relate the paucity of women members of the Parisian avant-garde to broader political and social conditions in France at that time. Like other women artists, Laurencin was subjected to a particular burden: social expectations put her in the position of identifying as either an artist, and thus risking a potential sacrifice of her femininity, or as a socially-acceptable woman, which might dictate that she relinquish her identity as artist. Anne Wagner has observed the unique circumstance of the modern female artist, noting that not only did she have multiple roles to fill, but that “what is striking about this list of roles is not that a woman might be thought of—or might think of herself—as playing any one of them, but that she could be understood, if not simultaneously to occupy them all, then at least to put them on and take them off with the practiced frequency of a trouper in the Christmas pantomime.” Laurencin’s works of this period make visible the simultaneity of these roles. In fact, this seems to be the primary function and challenge of her two artist group portraits; the viewer is asked to observe and respond to multivalent relationships, tensions and statements of identity in one image, which cannot be resolved by either narrative or iconography.

Analysis of Laurencin’s works reveal that far from merely capitulating to the roles of muse and woman painter, she mobilized the aesthetic ideologies that surrounded her as a vehicle to display multiplicity of roles that, as Wagner points out, she constantly inhabited. Her later works, like the 1924 Self-Portrait, have been associated with Joan Rivière’s theories of
womanliness as a masquerade (Fig. 23). As we have seen, Birnbaum reads Laurencin’s “mature” works such as this, as evidence of an attempt to “exaggerate her own femininity as a way to avoid the negative response that her ambition provoked.” However, when returned to the specific context of the male dominated Parisian avant-garde in which Laurencin developed her approach, this appropriation of the feminine takes on a different significance. Namely, it becomes evident that she sought to utilize her gendered position as a source of authorial power to claim space over a particular rhetoric, the rhetoric of the feminine. Such a tactic was only effective when Laurencin was able to cast herself as the individual woman-artist in the midst of many men. Throughout her career Laurencin, associated with many female artists and writers, such as Natalie Barney and Romaine Brookes but kept a degree of professional distance from associations with the femme-peintre. Aside from Laurencin’s association with the FAM, which she did not align her self with until much later in her career when she chose to contribute to their annual “Women’s Art Collective” show in 1930 Laurencin’s initial professional trajectory was tied to the Bateau-Lavoir group, and her work should be related to the social, political, and artistic tendencies of that circle.

It seems that Laurencin was aware of the pitfalls of being seen as “one of many” in this particular moment of modernism, especially when the “many” refers to “many women.” The social freedom of women in this period, incarnated in the figure of the “new woman” or femme moderne, was quite often accepted in theory and in popular culture, but not in practice. The rise

71 Rivière, 303.

72 Birnbaum,110.

73 Ibid.

74 Laurencin became a member of the Societe des Femmes Artistes Modernes (FAM) in at the invitation of Anne Camax-Zoegger in 1930.
of the new woman brought with it an increasing number of trained female artists, some of whom formalized their own group: The Union of Women Painters and Sculptors was founded in 1891 to create opportunities to show the work of female artists and provide chances to study from live models, but it also provided members with a broader sense of community and professional identity. Since women were at that time not allowed full membership in the Academy, the Union was one of few places where women artists could find such a network. Significantly, Laurencin, who trained at the private Académie Humbert with male and female students, did not join the Union; it seems that she did not share the Union’s interest in developing a unified female brand of French art. It was only after her career was firmly established that Laurencin agreed, upon invitation, to associate with a later all-female association of painters (the FAM). Instead, she chose strategically to align herself with the more radical and significantly less socially respectable bande à Picasso, where, as one of the few women painters in the group (the only one in the groups early years) she would have an opportunity to distinguish herself, even if that also required she be placed in the position of constantly having to also navigate the dual roles of muse and artist within the context of this group.

The Structuralist Principle at Play in Group of Artists

In order to grapple with the complex set of social challenges she faced as a woman artist, she turned to Cubism, adapting a play with pictorial signs operative in Picasso’s works of the same period. Scholars of Cubism have employed Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of structuralist linguistics as an explanatory framework for Picasso’s work of the early 1910s, particularly in relation to his collages and constructed sculptures. Here, Picasso experiments with the ways in

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75 Birnbaum, Perry and Garb have all talked about the feminized aesthetic of the Union.
which visual signs communicate meaning to the viewer, often confounding our expectations for each of the elements within the work by setting them in opposition to one another. As Christine Poggi writes of his constructed Guitar, “by deploying sets of binary opposites—recessed versus projecting forms, transparent versus opaque planes, straight versus curved edges—Picasso called attention to the relational value of the formal signifiers.” That is to say, just as in spoken or written language, in which the meaning of a word depends upon its relation to other words (such as “stop” and “go”), the juxtaposition of binary pairs in the work of art allows the viewer to make meaning from what she sees. Looking at Picasso’s collage Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass of 1912 (Fig. 24) helps to elucidate this principle: the body of the guitar is suggested through the curved segment of pasted paper at left, painted with wood-grain patterning. However, this fragment only communicates the body of the guitar through its pairing with the black crescent shape at the bottom of the canvas or alongside the blue rectangular form that is suggestive of the neck. In isolation, none of these pasted elements would signify a guitar: they only can be read that way when set in relation to one another.

A similar structuralist principle can be found in Picasso’s earlier works. If we look at his early group portrait, Au Lapin Agile (1905; Fig. 25), we see that it, too, derives meaning through opposition or difference. As Leo Steinberg has observed, this painting—in which Picasso represents himself (at far right) along with two of his acquaintances—is deliberately heterogeneous. Picasso combines the “signature styles” of Édouard Manet (with a quotation of his Guitarrero of 1861-1862 at far left), Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (in the woman at the bar) and the Harlequin motif from his own slightly earlier “Rose period” for his self-portrait. This

\[\text{\footnotesize 76} \text{Christine Poggi, } \text{In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism and the Invention of Collage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).} \]

\[\text{\footnotesize 77} \text{Ibid. Poggi refers to this interpretation of Steinberg’s in the introduction of her text.} \]
process of pastiche makes the viewer aware of the way she correlates the identity of the artist with a particular set of motifs and formal characteristics. Moreover, we can read this group portrait as a statement about the artist’s awareness of the relational nature of his own identity: he defines himself with reference to, and to some degree in opposition to, his famous predecessors. Within this context, one could make the argument that Picasso’s play with signification began first as experimentation with the signifiers of identity as they related to the painted portrait.

In *Group of Artists* Laurencin presents herself, and those around her, in a manner carefully calibrated to raise questions about her claims to various specific and conflicting identities: as an artist and as a woman; as a “feminine” and an “avant-gardist” painter; as subject and as producer of the painting. As we shall see, the various facets of this identity are not brought together easily. However, the operating principle of binary pairings is what allows Laurencin to construct this complex network of intersecting and conflicting roles. In *Group of Artists*, the viewer is asked to observe and respond to multivalent relationships, tensions and statements of identity that cannot be resolved by either narrative or iconography. In Laurencin’s painting, a cohesive identity for the larger group is constantly frustrated by the perpetual shifting of the relationships between the figures, in a manner akin to Picasso’s *Au Lapin Agile*. However, in *Au Lapin Agile*, the presence of other artists is implied by the appropriation of their styles, as opposed to actual portraits of Manet and Lautrec. In the case of *Group of Artists*, Laurencin removes any reference to a literal location or a plausible narrative that might have brought her figures together. One could argue makes her painting more confrontational, and more manifesto-like, than Picasso’s.

Viewed through the lens of post-structuralism, *Group of Artists* presents an endless series of associations that can be made between each of the figures contained within. Knowledge of the
figures’ identities and interrelationships would at first prompt us to divide this painting into two romantic couples. Given their prominence in the image, we are encouraged to consider as primary the connection between Laurencin and Apollinaire. Although he is the central figure in the canvas, the two are also paired visually, wedged between the figures of Picasso and Olivier. The two are linked in the painting, but (interestingly, considering that they were romantically involved in this period) little emotional connection is suggested, as they do not interact through gaze or touch. If the principle at work here is heterosexual relationships, than Apollinaire and Laurencin must be aligned with Picasso and Olivier, also a couple at that time. Within this context, Laurencin’s identity is defined primarily as Apollinaire’s lover, the female muse to the great poet. This alignment is a tenuous one, however, since no sense of intimacy is communicated between either couple.

One is reminded of Alsdorf’s observation that each figure in Fantin-Latour’s artist-group portrait is strategically isolated, to affirm their independence within the larger group. In the *Studio in Les Batignolles*, some of the male figures gaze directly out at the viewer, while others gaze at the canvas, but none noticeably appear to acknowledge the others. The same is true for the *Group of Artists*, in which all of the figures gaze directly at the viewer. Here, the figures are defined by way of their romantic relationships but each also maintains their independence from the others in the group. Even Picasso, although he is shown in profile, has been given a face so dramatically two-dimensional that his ringed eye also seems to turn toward the viewer. Each engages with the viewer directly, but with the other figures in the painting, only indirectly. Just as in Latour’s painting, this indirectly engagement enhances our awareness of the individuality of each. However, like the *Demoiselles* their direct gazes also affirm the notion the *Group of Artists*
is not about assigning each individual figure a fixed identity, but about the viewer’s complicit participation in the construction of those identities.

However, the division of two romantic couples is not the only way of reading the network of relationships presented: we could just as easily divide the painting into gendered groupings, pairing Picasso and Apollinaire, Laurencin and Olivier. Arguably, though, the contrast between Laurencin’s rigid figure and Olivier’s lithe form is one of opposition, rather than similarity. Each woman holds up a hand that is directed to the center of the canvas, but the simplified stiffness of Laurencin’s in comparison to Olivier’s curled fingertips heightens the differences between the two women. The single flower that Laurencin holds associates her with the overflowing bower above Olivier’s head, and if having flowers around you makes you more feminine, then Olivier is certainly “winning” in that category. Laurencin’s depiction of Olivier in relation to her own self-representation speaks to the complexity of her identity as it is represented in the group portrait, and the extent to which she is caught between seemingly contradictory roles: artist and woman. While the severity of her self-representation would seem to distance her from the hyper-feminized Olivier, the single flower that she holds effectively maintains her link to the role of female muse. By contrast, Picasso has been given the dog as his attribute; the facial similarities between the man and the canine heighten the link between the two. While the implied meaning here remains unclear, it seems to be a pun on the use of the dog as a traditional symbol for fidelity. A key component of Picasso’s identity as a virile rogue was his reputation as philanderer. Thus the inclusion of the dog could serve as a humorous inversion of the traditional iconography for the dog, often an attribute assigned to women as a sign of their loyalty. This aspect of Picasso’s personality may have been particularly poignant for Laurencin, who, as a
woman, could not assume the same kind of sexually empowered persona without risking her social propriety.

Yet the possibilities do not end there: a third grouping would align Laurencin and Picasso, positioning the two as a pair of painters, and identifying her as his peer. Keeping in mind that in 1908 Picasso had a strong cult following, but was still far from the height of his career, it would not have been overreaching for Laurencin to present herself as his professional equal in this moment. In fact, as I note above, although art history has generally excluded Laurencin from accounts of Cubism, Apollinaire, Allard and Salmon lauded her work—albeit in highly gendered terms, for the most part.\(^ {78}\) Apollinaire likened her to Sophonisba Anguissola while he also placed her in the upper echelons of avant-gardism, with Matisse and Picasso. The fact that she was the only woman included in these early accounts of the Cubist movement, in spite of the feminizing rhetoric used to discuss her work, positions her as an insider artist in the development of the Cubist project along with Picasso, Braque, Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes.\(^ {79}\)

The title of the work, *Group of Artists*, also has significance in this regard. Although it is unclear whether Laurencin herself supplied the title “Group of Artists” for the painting, it was referred to as such once it was included in the Stein collection, and Laurencin’s audience would have viewed the painting through that lens. If Laurencin and Picasso are paired, what, then is the relationship between Olivier and Apollinaire? Should they be read as two muses? Are they portrayed as artists of another sort? The title brings into question the definition of “artist” within the specific context of this painting and the artistic circle it documents. While the definition of

\(^{78}\) Apollinaire, 230.

\(^{79}\) Laurencin is the only woman artist associated with Cubism in Apollinaire’s writings on the Cubist movement at the early stage.
“artist” can easily be expanded to include Apollinaire as a practitioner of the literary arts, Olivier’s presence in the work, given her effeminate characterization, calls this definition into question. I find it tempting to read the inclusion of Fernande Olivier as Laurencin’s own commentary on the performative nature of the muse. Is she suggesting that there is a degree of artifice in performing the role of the muse? The theatricality and sly smile that Olivier possesses seems to suggest that she knows she belongs with this group, even if the other the figures refuse to acknowledge her. However, as with the rest of the painting, it is impossible to firmly secure this reading of her expression. This plethora of possible links in the work is what has made the painting so difficult to interpret. Many possibilities are put forth, but there is no resolution: meaning remains constantly in play. As with Picasso’s Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass, the meaning of each figure or component of Laurencin’s group portrait is only understood in relation to the other figures in the portrait. This creates a series of slippages in which the viewer is placed in the position of constantly constructing and then reconstructing an identity for the four figures shown.

The Mask at Play in the Group Portrait

Picasso and Laurencin’s alignment in the Group of Artists is also subtly reaffirmed by the fact that both of their faces are dramatically and overtly masked: the contrast of light and shadow dividing Laurencin’s face, and the striking impact of the mask-like profile of Picasso, draw attention to their shared presence at the left of the canvas. Arguably, the mask motif, purportedly “discovered” or “invented” by Picasso, initiates the perpetual construction and reconstruction of identity that occurs in Laurencin’s Group of Artists. For their masks function as both literal and metaphoric barriers, frustrading the natural process of reading the mimetic features of a portrait to
access their interior, subjective qualities. The mask also serves to remind the viewer of the hand of the artist and her control over her figures in the act of painting them. In Laurencin’s group portrait the conceit of the mask functions as a tool to unfix the identities of her sitters and to articulate the realities of her gendered relationship to the avant-garde, namely that her identity in the painting is a performed one, that does not necessary reveal her inner “truth.” As I note above, the tradition of portraiture shifted from an emphasis on accurate representation to an exploration of the boundaries of representation: how much can an image be abstracted and stylized before its referent is no longer legible? Laurencin’s appropriation and deployment of the mask fell directly in line with these ideologies and questions.

Laurencin’s appropriation of Picasso’s Iberian mask motif to represent his face in her portrait signals that she is playing the same game of quotation that Picasso himself had begun in *Au Lapin Agile*. In other words, it functions like the Harlequin costume in Picasso’s 1905 painting: the mask equates the artist’s identity to his style, even as it also questions that relationship through the very process of pastiche or quotation. Furthermore, Picasso’s masked face also makes the viewer aware of the process through which his identity is constructed: that the artist’s signature style comes to stand for the artist himself. Further evidence of Laurencin’s awareness of, and participation in, the Cubist game of appropriation can be seen in her 1911 painting *Maison Meubelee*. Elizabeth Kahn has identified Laurencin’s use of the Harlequin motif to incorporate a portrait of Picasso into a larger painting, in which he is implicated through the appropriation of the Harlequin figure that he frequent used to portray himself (Fig 26).80 It becomes evident when looking at the body of work that Laurencin produced during the years that she was associated with *bande à Picasso* that she was an active player in the games of quotation

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80 Kahn, 57.
and appropriation associated with the group at large, especially when it comes to the motif of the mask.

The oval-ringed eyes and sharp profile make Picasso’s face the most visibly mask-like within Laurencin’s group portrait. Yet the sharp shading of Laurencin’s own face also connotes “Africanized” mask imagery. As with Picasso, through this gesture, Laurencin makes reference to her own art—her “Africanized” portraits of Jacob and others in this period. The rendering of her features may suggest a sense of dimensionality that might be read symbolically, hinting at a higher level of depth, intellect or self-awareness on the part of the artist herself than her fellow artists. However, the masking of her face also frustrates an attempt on the part of the viewer to interpret in it any emotive expression. This dynamic of withholding or masking is what limits the viewer’s interpretive options and forces the identity of the individuals represented to be determined only in relation to each other. What is significant about the in Group of Artists is not just that Laurencin appropriated the mask motif, but that she applied it selectively to certain members of this group of artists.

Within the specific context of this group portrait, the gesture of masking also speaks to Laurencin’s relationship to the gendered connotations of masquerade. Once the act of masking is identified, it is possible to read in the Group of Artists a commentary on this disconnect between the identity of the individuals represented and the flattened, simplified shapes that come to signify or stand for their presence in the painting. I would argue that Laurencin’s relationship to the avant-garde as a female painter motivated her to produce a group portrait that lays bear the process of determining “truths” about a sitter’s identity in traditional portraiture. She makes the viewer aware of her knowing and canny performance of the masquerade for her own purposes.
To more fully understand the mask’s gendered and sexual implications in *Group of Artists*, we might usefully return to Picasso’s *Gertrude Stein*. As is well known, Picasso agreed to paint Stein in 1905; but, after months of attempting to capture her likeness without satisfaction, he chose to paint a mask-like version of her face from memory, while she was away traveling in 1906. Robert Lubar has argued that this work makes visible Picasso’s struggle with portraiture and traditional methods of representation, as well as the gendered and sexed dimensions of his encounter with Stein, a powerful lesbian figure.81 He interprets Picasso’s masking of Stein’s face as an attempt to regain his control over a sitter that eluded him because of her rejection of normative gender roles for the period. In this work, then, the mask detaches mimetic resemblance from psychological realism, and it also acts as a defense or shield on the part of the artist, who cannot come to terms with the meaning of her identity in relation to his. Poggi also interprets the portrait in this way, arguing that “in his portrait of Gertrude Stein the imposition of an Iberian mask functions to sever the relationship of resemblance and psychological expression, giving Stein’s visage remarkable intensity but negating a sense of inwardness.”82 This gesture of “severing” functions in both *Gertrude Stein* portrait and *Group of Artists* to free the painted portrait from the implied obligation to accurately represent the physical characteristics of the sitter. Instead, these portraits are about the relationship between the painted figure, the sitter and the artist, because the both the artist and the viewer have become active participants in the construction of the sitter’s identity.

The act of masking thus serves multiple purposes in the case of the Stein portrait, in ways that give us news ways to consider Laurencin’s use of the same motif. In *Gertrude Stein*, the

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82 Poggi, 32.
mask effectively allowed Picasso to assert his authorial power over the sitter, while shielding her from the gaze of the viewer—and vice versa. The same could be said about the figures in Laurencin’s *Group of Artists*, for the simplified style of the portraits seems likewise to communicate intensity without providing a sense of deep psychological presence. Although not as canonical an image as Picasso’s portrait of Stein, Laurencin’s portraits of herself, Apollinaire, Picasso and Olivier would come to stand for the image of the Bateau-Lavoir group at the mythic moment that Cubism was born. The masking of the figures is what ultimately pushes Laurencin’s group portrait out of the realm of fixed interpretation and ties it inseparably to the experimental aspects of Cubism circa 1908, a time when experimentation in portraiture was a central component of this developing style.

Like Picasso, Laurencin explored the arbitrary relation of the painted figure to the identity of the person represented. Laurencin left the “true” identity of the group and its individual members to be determined by the viewer. This engagement with Cubist portraiture allowed Laurencin to represent herself in multiple, and often conflicting, ways in relation to the other figures in the works. In so doing, she produced a painting that cultivated the positive associations of contrary ideals of femininity in a period marked by ambivalence toward women’s social roles. As both artists were struggling to secure their own identities in the public sphere, the chief interest for both was an investigation in to the extent to which individual identity of the sitters in their portraits might be represented through symbols rather than solely by mimetic signifiers or indices.

In order to understand Laurencin’s group portraits within the Cubist context, therefore, we must forego formalist analogies and look to the conceptual aspects her work shared with Picasso’s in this period, as mapped in both artists’ portrait paintings. If we accept that, in works
such as this, the identity of the individual is constructed through his or her relationship to the larger group; and if we also accept that a collective identity is created for the group through the linkage of multiple relationships within a group portrait, then Laurencin’s group portrait can be read as a work that intentionally frustrates the construction of both types of identity. The portrait serves as a manifesto directly specifically to her peers in the Bateau-Lavoir circle, a manifesto in which she stakes multiple claims to identity: as a woman, as a member of an artistic “power couple,” and a Cubist artist on par with Picasso.

Viewed this way, Laurencin’s work is evidently deeply rooted in exploring the questions of identity and representation that preoccupied her male peers. She adapted the vocabulary of Cubism, including the gesture of masking, to develop her own complex set of solutions to these questions. The strongest testament to the effectiveness of her approach may, paradoxically, be the degree to which scholars have struggled to determine meaning or establish a clear reading of the painting itself. For, while she slipped farther into the margins of history, and Picasso became increasingly more mythologized, the complexity of Marie Laurencin’s painting disappeared from view.
CHAPTER 3

THE MUSE: A FEMINIST READING OF APOLLINAIRE AND HIS FRIENDS

In her first artist-group portrait, *Group of Artists*, Laurencin visually defined her relationship to the *bande à Picasso*, strategically choosing to portray herself alongside its core members. In that painting, as we have seen, she systematically employed select features of Cubist portraiture to further affirm her access to Cubism itself—even as she also opened up the question of her belonging to that movement by virtue of her gender. For Laurencin, the group portrait thus functioned as a powerful tool that allowed her to lay claim, as a woman artist, to a particular professional identity within the avant-garde. However, just one year later, in 1909, the dynamics of the Parisian avant-garde had shifted dramatically, in ways that changed Laurencin’s relationship to Cubism and, more broadly, to the avant-garde. The parameters of her professional identity had to be redefined. In this moment, she turned once again to the genre of the artist-group portrait, producing *Apollinaire and His Friends*, a work also known as *Reunion in the Country* (Fig. 2).

*Apollinaire and His Friends* presents the same four figures that appeared in *Group of Artists* (Apollinaire, Olivier, Picasso and Laurencin), with the addition of several others, some of whom have been firmly identified and some who have not. Stylistically, the figures are treated similarly, with simplified features and mask-like faces, rendered in the reductive, “primitivizing” early Cubist mode described in chapter two. However, in *Apollinaire and His Friends*, the group portrait is transported into fantastical landscape, and the figures are framed by abstracted curtains on both the left and right. Unlike the spare, apparently declarative *Group of Artists*, this painting makes a compendium of references to other works of art: to recent, notorious works including Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* and Henri Matisse’s *Bonheur de Vivre* (1906; Fig. 27), as well
as to works from the distant past, including Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera* (1477-1482; Fig. 28) and Ingres’s *The Source* (1820-1856; Fig. 29).

Why did Laurencin choose to produce a large-scale, multi-figure painting that combines the group portrait with these various art-historical allusions? And why did Laurencin’s treatment of her own self-representation within this work depart markedly from her image in *Group of Artists*? In the first painting, she juxtaposes her reserved, subdued image with the more stereotypically feminine figure of Olivier; in *Apollinaire and His Friends*, she reverses course, depicting herself as the embodiment of the ideal of femininity and sexual availability. Her expression is coy, similar to Olivier’s in the *Group of Artists*, and her body is exposed to the viewer. Although she is dressed in a flowing gown, the entire outline of her silhouette beneath is made visible by way of one long, curving line. As we have seen, from the earliest point in her career Laurencin was frequently cast in the role of muse. Rather than throwing off this association, it seems that in *Apollinaire and His Friends*, she endeavors to capitalize on it. This recasting of herself as an idealized muse, which might at first seem to undermine her attempts to construct a professional identity, can in fact be read as Laurencin’s attempt to reconcile two incongruous roles.

In this chapter, I argue that Laurencin’s claim to artistic legitimacy inheres in her engagement with the pastoral tradition and its recent avant-garde iterations, especially Matisse’s *Bonheur de Vivre* and Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, two ambitious and notorious works that stage their own radicalism by reference to the classical style of the Academy and the tradition of the female nude. Laurencin’s group portrait responded to, and utilized both of these recent precedents: like *Group of Artists*, it associates both the artist and her work with the avant-garde. At the same time, Laurencin here crafts an aesthetic independent of both Cubism and Fauvism,
pointing to her recognition that she could not fully belong to either group as a woman painter in 1909. Whereas Group of Artists fit into existing definitions of Cubism circa 1908, by the following year, that movement, and Laurencin’s relation to it, had shifted dramatically. The diverse stylistic allegiances visible in Apollinaire and His Friends speak both to the instability of the avant-garde in the moment of its production and to Laurencin’s skill in navigating that rapidly changing landscape. It would seem that in 1909 Laurencin was already aware of both the need to construct a language to express her particular experience as a woman painter, and the potential power that the signifiers of femininity might serve to these ends. As the work hung for many years in Apollinaire’s Paris apartment—presumably, it was a gift to him—it seems likely that Laurencin directed this manifesto-like statement to the same small audience of avant-garde initiates that would have known her Group of Artists.

Read in the context of these circumstances, Laurencin’s appropriation of Picasso and Matisse—and the relationship that she constructs in her painting between the decorative, the classical, and the idyll—can be read as yet another attempt at a pictorial manifesto, one whose production was motivated by the tenuous relationship to the avant-garde, that as a woman, Laurencin was consistently in the position of having to reaffirm. In this second group portrait, the visual language of Laurencin’s manifesto has shifted in an important way: where in her earlier work, Laurencin created a slippage between the seemingly incongruous identities of “artist” and “woman,” now the two roles are conflated in the form of her own self-representation. Laurencin draws upon the traditions of the pastoral and the decorative to create a new visual idiom, one that might open up a space for the experience of the femme-peintre in a male-dominated avant-garde. What critics of the time and historians today have accepted at face value as Laurencin’s innate style is thus shown to be a strategic response to the circumstances that
surrounded her at the beginning of her career. Laurencin saw that Cubism as it was practiced in 1909 could no longer accommodate her particular position as a woman artist—so she began to develop her own strand of modernism.

On the stylistic level, *Apollinaire and His Friends* is carefully constructed to make the viewer aware of the artificiality of its “feminine” qualities, and the performative roles of the figures depicted. What at first appears to be a pastoral gathering, upon closer examination reveals itself, instead, to be a highly constructed tableau: construed this way, it portrays actors on a stage. Laurencin thus uses *Apollinaire and His Friends* simultaneously to affirm her unique position within the Bateau-Lavoir group, and to inform the viewer of the performative nature of the feminine style she deploys as a result. In what follows, I address the gender politics of the painting, and consider the potential for a feminist reading of the work, exploring in detail the relationships it establishes between gender and artifice, the decorative and the classical. By identifying clues that Laurencin gives her viewer about the performative nature of her identity, it becomes possible to read her exaggerated femininity as a gesture of strategic appropriation. One that could have been read by her small cohort of viewers as a subversive commentary on her gendered position to the avant-garde rather than simply celebratory of the feminine ideal.

**A Pastoral Gathering: *Apollinaire and His Friends***

*Apollinaire and His Friends* can be divided into two halves, with a cluster of three figures to the right and three to the left. Apollinaire, seated in an armchair reminiscent of the one portrayed in *Group of Artists*, is positioned at center. He thus serves simultaneously as the divide, pivot, or mediator between the two groups. As I note above, Laurencin has once again painted herself into this gathering, this time in the bottom right quadrant of the canvas: the
position of the composition occupied in *Group of Artists* by Fernande Olivier. As discussed in the previous chapter, in *Group of Artists*, Olivier functions as an emblem of the feminine ideal. Laurencin’s choice to present herself in the same position, and with a similarly coquettish pose, is significant in determining her larger aim: to conflate herself with this image of ideal femininity. The blue of her gown and the highlighted curvature of her leg, which ends in an artfully exposed foot, draw the viewer’s eye and subtly divert attention from the figure of Apollinaire.

Arguably, here Laurencin has eroticized her own body more than she did in the *Group of Artists*, exposing it for the appraisal of the viewer. The entire length of her body is visible, and although only her delicate foot appears from beneath her skirt, the outline of her leg is articulated beneath its fabric. She is positioned closest to the edge of the canvas and looks out directly at the viewer, with a serious but still pleasant expression. In contrast with the *Group of Artists*, her body is significantly more fluid and, although still simplified, has a more tactile quality. The shading of her skirt implies the weight of her figure beneath the drapery, and heightens the sense of corporeality in her figure, as does the exposure of her one naked foot.

Paula Birnbaum and Marsha Meskimmon both suggest that through the sexualized representation of her own body, and that of the other women in the painting, Laurencin presents a critique of the limited access that women had to the avant-garde as muses and models rather than participating artists. Birnbaum further argues that Laurencin’s play with masking in her early works correlates a “masked,” sexualized female body with stereotypes of women in this period—specifically, those stereotypes of the “new” woman as sexually available or even

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deviant. However, as Laurencin is arguably the most corporeal woman in the painting, and the most traditionally muse-like, it seems likely that her intervention pertains most closely to her own individual identity in relation to the peers directly depicted in, or indirectly invoked by, the painting—rather than a broader commentary on the plight of women.

The placement of the figures relative to Laurencin in *Apollinaire and His Friends* also seems to have significance in terms of the painting’s manifesto-like statement about her avant-garde identity. Where in *Group of Artists* Laurencin is integrated within the larger group, here she remains physically separate. A still life, a vase of either orange flowers or fruit that sits precariously on an amorphous brown table intervenes between Laurencin and the threesome on the right. Picasso resurfaces here, now positioned directly behind Apollinaire’s shoulder; he is identifiable thanks to his dark ringed eyes, flat scull-cap of short black hair, and the “Africanized” geometry of his features. Laurencin, that is, makes reference to Picasso’s style in his self-portraits—and to her own depiction of him in *Group of Artists*. Behind Picasso, we see a male figure with an aquiline nose and a blonde goatee, presumed to be the poet Maurice

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84 Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986). Paula Birnbaum, and Anna Novakov. *Essays on Women’s Artistic and Cultural Contributions 1919-1939*. See Also: Gill Perry, *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde*. Both Birnbaum and Meskimmon restrict their interpretation to the function of the female body in Laurencin’s painting. Arguably, while Laurencin enhances the sexual quality of her own body, the same signifiers of eroticism are not inscribed on the bodies of the other women in the painting, suggesting that something more complex is at work. Rather, both male and female, seem to share a similar demure and vaguely feminized sense of composure. Looking at Laurencin’s artistic output in this period, such a black and white commentary on gender politics seems out of character. While she would eventually move away from depictions of the male figure, *Apollinaire and His Friends* provides an important example of the way that Laurencin conceived of the role of the male body in relation to the female body in her work of this period and her play with traditional gender binaries. These existing interpretations also fail to fully address the extent to which Laurencin’s group portrait functions within a larger canon of avant-garde figural paintings, or the particular significance of her choice to place her figures in a landscape. Furthermore, in failing to acknowledge the parallel narratives for the painting (the appropriation of the “feminine” and the exposing of her femininity as performative) Laurencin’s gesture must be interpreted as either feminist, or subservient to male desire, when in fact the painting communicates both at the same time. Those scholars who dismiss a feminist reading of Laurencin’s work often rely on her own statements about her work and her relationship to male artists. In her memoir she claims that the genius of made her uncomfortable, and in interviews late in life she painted of a picture of herself as innately feminine, making art without care for conceptual development or avant-garde engagement. However, taking these comments at face value requires overlooking the many complicated aspects of Laurencin’s work, especially these early works.
Cremnitz. The woman positioned between Picasso and Cremnitz has yet to be firmly identified. Julia Fagan-King has made the case that this is a portrait of Laurencin’s mother, but this seems an unlikely attribution.

The identities of the “muse” figures on the left of the canvas are also difficult to pin down. The central figure has been read as another portrait of Olivier. She, like Cremnitz and Picasso, can be identified thanks to the similarity to Laurencin’s earlier representation of her. Who the other two figures in the trio are meant to depict is unclear; the short-haired figure is said to be Gertrude Stein, and the blonde has been read as the female poet Marie Gillot. The difficulty of these attributions is significant for two reasons. First, it speaks to the fragility of avant-garde networks, in a state of extreme flux: with people traveling in and out of each other’s circles, it has become extremely difficult to keep track of who would have been associated with whom. Second, and more important to Laurencin’s portraiture practice, it speaks to the problematic aspect of her reductive style—her “masking” through painterly means. As we have seen, Laurencin used the mask motif to great effect in the interest of raising questions of identity in her group portraits. But the mask also runs the risk of rendering the sitter illegible to a viewer who is not already “in the know.” Conversely, this may show that Laurencin mindfully produced this work for a specific, small audience of viewers, an insular audience of which she was also a member.

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85 Maurice Cremnitz was also known as Maurice Chevrier. A Symbolist poet, Julia Fagan-King observes Laurencin’s choice to depict Cremnitz with features associated with a Jewish identity, the hooked noise and pointed beard. These signifiers are however, more strongly associated with representations of Jewish men in the Italian Renaissance than they are in the French academic tradition. This seems a likely attribution, as Laurencin painted a portrait of his family the year previously and the resemblance is quite similar. However, the dark-haired woman at his side has not been firmly identified.

86 It seems out of place that Laurencin would include her mother amongst a group that is otherwise made up entirely of her peers and professional associates. Furthermore, biographic accounts like those of Elizabeth Louise Kahn’s have suggested that Laurencin’s mother did not like Apollinaire or support her daughter’s association with the socio-political radicalism of the Bateau-Lavoir.
Though at least some of the figures in the painting are thus recognizable, the setting frankly declares the unreality of the scene depicted, informing the viewer of the performed nature of the roles taken on by each of the figures within. The entire tableau is staged before a decorative landscape, with rolling hills, trees, and a body of water over which a bridge expands, and she frames her gathering with abstracted repoussoir curtains. Although the landscape provides a strong sense of depth, the figures themselves are pressed against the canvas. Coupled with the figures’ stiff poses, the unreal background and framing curtains suggest that the viewer should take the picture as a posed tableaux, rather than a realistic scene, and that the figures should be read as performers. This tactic functions to remind the viewer of the preordained roles available to both the male and female figures in the group: muse and poet, god and follower.

To heighten to overt artifice of the painting’s setting, Laurencin makes explicit reference to a variety of art-historical precedents, both classical and contemporaneous. As I note in chapter one, Fagan-King argues that the symbolism here can be attributed to Rosicrucian mysticism. However, many layers of iconographic references are visible in the painting. The form and composition of the work as a whole, for example, rely on Botticelli’s Primavera. Both paintings are structured by the bilateral division of two groups of figures, separated by one central deity (Venus in the Botticelli, Apollinaire in Laurencin’s painting). Perhaps most obvious is the triumvirate of the three graces, which appear on the left side of both works. The orange flowers in Gillot’s hair and in the vase near Laurencin also seem to make reference to the orange trees that frame Botticelli’s painting. What is more, Laurencin’s own expression, and her blond hair (both an artistic liberty, and a shift from her dark brown coiffure in Group of Artists) would align

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87 Fae Brauer, Rivals and Conspirators: The Pairs Salons and the Modern Art Centre (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 182. Rosicrucianism is a philosophical practice tied to a “secret” society that is believed to have originated in Germany in the seventeenth century. It is associated with a mystical Christianity.
her with the figure of Flora, the goddess of springtime.\textsuperscript{88} As a symbol of fertility and of ideal female comportment, Laurencin’s choice to align herself with Flora further supports a reading in which she actively sought to portray herself as a feminine ideal.

But Laurencin’s other allusions here position her as artist as well as muse. Through the painting’s composition Laurencin makes reference to Ingres’s \textit{Apotheosis of Homer} (1826-1827), an important precedent not only for Laurencin but also for Matisse (Fig. 30).\textsuperscript{89} Apollinaire’s seated position of honor in the painting mirrors that of Homer, and Laurencin includes her own self-portrait in the bottom right of the canvas, just as Ingres does in his painting. In addition to these two major precedents, Laurencin also references a variety of more contemporary, avant-garde works. The arched bridge of the landscape, for example, might refer both to Paul Cézanne’s landscapes and to Braque’s paintings in homage to Cézanne, such as \textit{The Viaduct at L’Estaque} (1908, Fig 31). Such quotations demonstrate not only Laurencin’s awareness of several canonical precedents, but also her knowledge of the ways that vanguard styles of the moment tend to “cite” such predecessors.

All of this is to say that the painting surpasses \textit{Group of Artists} and Laurencin’s other paintings to date in visual and descriptive detail. And yet, as with \textit{Group of Artists}, the “meaning” of the work is continually deferred. Why are these figures gathered together in this

\textsuperscript{88} In the \textit{Primavera}, the figure of Chloris is transformed in to Flora, the goddess of springtime after she gives her body to Zephyr. Laurencin’s choice to depict herself a goddess who has attained her status by way of a male assault is ironic when considered in the context of Elizabeth Louise Kahn’s assertion that Apollinaire was an abusive partner. However, Flora is also a symbol of fertility and fecundity, which may have motivated Laurencin’s choice to take up her position in the canvas if she wanted to affirm her womanliness and her muse like qualities. The choice to make the link to Flora by way of changing her hair to blonde, might also be a reference to the Petrarchan ideal of beauty, something that, as student of Renaissance art, Laurencin would have likely been familiar with. Laurencin wrote in her memoirs that she remembers being particularly drawn to the works of Sandro Botticelli during her visits to the Louvre as a young student. As an educated artist, training both at the Sevres and at the Académie Humbert, it seems extremely probably that Laurencin would have been familiar with the \textit{Primavera} although she did not travel to Italy.

\textsuperscript{89} Margaret Werth draws out the references to both Ingres’s paintings in her book: Werth, Margaret. \textit{The Joy of Life: the Idyllic in French Art c. 1900} (Berkley, CA: Univeristy of California Press, 2002).
space? What is the function of the group? What can we extrapolate about Laurencin’s attitude toward the group she chose to portray, and her role within it, from this conglomeration of disparate stylistic elements and classical appropriations? Though we can never fully answer these questions—Laurencin seems intentionally to frustrate our desire to do so—we can come to a more satisfactory reckoning with them if we consider this work, like Group of Artists, in relation to avant-garde networks and relationships in the pivotal years of 1908-09.

The Avant-Garde in Flux

1908-1909 was an important year in Laurencin’s career. Stein’s purchase of the Group of Artists was her first major sale, marking the start of her professional career and her entrée into the avant-garde. In 1909, she also showed three works at the Salon des Indépendants: Artemis, Diana at the Hunt and Allegory. Smaller in scale than Apollinaire and His Friends, these works also play on themes of allegory and the pastoral, although without the added element of portraiture. The works were received well and her career began to flourish. However, as a recently-admitted member to avant-garde circles, salons and galleries, Laurencin also suddenly found herself in the position of having to navigate a world that was in a constant state of upheaval. Alliances were perpetually shifting; artists were in competition with one another for the attention of collectors and dealers. In this overheated atmosphere, the style and content of one’s work communicated to other members of this small community where one’s allegiances lay.

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90 Sherry Buckberrough, in a talk at the 2014 Feminist Art History Conference, addressed this issue of femininity in the context of the French pre-war moment. She outlined an alternative mode of feminism enacted by women such as Sonja Delaunay, Alice Bailly and Marie Laurencin. Far removed from the political/suffragist movement that these women would have thought of as feminist, their subversive and radical approach to their art and their gender should be understood as feminist, but not as political or tied to a larger movement in the way that modern American scholars tend to think about feminism.
In this atmosphere of instability, the developments that occurred in the careers of Picasso and Braque—the painters with whom Laurencin was most closely associated—also had a direct impact on her position in the avant-garde. This was the year that the gallerist Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler offered Picasso a stipend in exchange for exclusive access to his work. Kahnweiler’s financial support allowed Picasso and Braque to extricate themselves from the critical, and often caustic, environment of the Salon—the same salon that ridiculed Matisse’s *Bonheur de vivre* (discussed further below) and forced Laurencin to navigate the issue of her “pure femininity.” The impact of this development has been well documented by historians of Cubism. Picasso and Braque’s work of this period shows a growing hermeticism, a style that Kahnweiler labeled “Analytic Cubism,” made possible by the freedom Kahnweiler gave them from the opinions of critics and the public at the avant-garde salons.\(^\text{91}\) A consideration of these circumstances in relation to Laurencin’s group portrait brings us back to Alsdorf’s theory of the “problem of the group.” The breakdown of the academy, the rise of alternative exhibition venues, and the need for the modern artist to affiliate himself (or herself) with a larger community, while simultaneously distinguishing himself (or herself) as an individual genius, prompted artists like Fantin-Latour and Courbet to address professional identity through pictorial manifestos.\(^\text{92}\) The Kahnweiler contract effectively neutralized this need for public self-definition for Picasso. Laurencin did not have the same luxury.

In fact, at the moment that Picasso was offered the stipend from Kahnweiler, he too was in the process of working on a large-scale artist-group portrait. In a gesture that bears striking


\(^{92}\) Alsdorf, 66.
similarity to Laurencin’s, early in 1909 he began to work on preparatory sketches for a large multi-figural painting, *Carnival at the Bistro*. Picasso conceived of this as a work to commemorate a banquet held at his studio, in honor of the artist Henri Rousseau (Fig. 32). The sketch shows six figures, both male and female, at a table. One holds a platter of fruit above his head, and a vase of flowers sits at the center of the table. The two still-life images incorporated into the larger canvas seem to link directly back to the fruit on the head of the “Marie Gillot” figure, and the vase next to Laurencin in *Apollinaire and His Friends*. The central male figure, reminiscent of Apollinaire in Laurencin’s painting, appears to take the form of Picasso’s Harlequin, a figure the artist frequently used to represent himself in earlier works, and one that Laurencin would also appropriate to depict him later in her career.\(^93\) *Carnival at the Bistro* was Picasso’s own, unrealized take on the group portrait, a genre that necessarily positions the artist within a larger group; its production was motivated by the pressures of public exposure. Instead, the first work that Picasso completed after the agreement with Kahnweiler was a still life. *Bread and Fruitdish on a Table* (1909; Fig. 33) distills the elements of the dining scene from *Carnival at the Bistro*, removing all references to portraiture. The expressive element of the earlier painting drops out at the precise moment that the pressure of Picasso to publicly define his artistic identity is removed from his life. This transition highlights just how much impact the circumstance of public exposure had on all artists’ work in this moment.

Without access to the same kind of financial support this pressure to secure a public identity remained for Laurencin—and the many other aspiring Cubist artists, like Metzinger,\(^93\) The work is: *Mason Mublee*. Rousseau, in turn, would go on to paint a dual portrait of Laurencin and Apollinaire in his *The Muse Inspiring the Poet*, which was also painted in 1909.\(^93\) Coincidentally, although Picasso never completed his commemorative painting of the Rousseau banquet, Gertrude Stein would embed it in the memories compiled in her readers as the famous dinner where Laurencin arrived intoxicated and had to be taken outside and scolded by Apollinaire.\(^93\) Stein’s recollection of this evening, aside from her description of Laurencin’s drunkenness, emphasizes how significant the dinner was to the entire Bande à Picasso.
Gleizes, Fernande Léger, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, who did not receive such a contract. David Cottington has dubbed this larger group of artists “Salon Cubists.” They, like Laurencin, were placed in the position of having to temper their stylistic radicalism for a more general audience than Picasso and Braque. The Kahnweiler contract effectively prevented Laurencin’s ability to lay claim to the same Cubist identity as Picasso and Braque, in spite of her close association with them. Aided by Kahnweiler, the two men began to work more closely together, engaging in a mutual process of experimentation and exchange. The direction that Picasso and Braque took did not suit Laurencin, either in terms of subject matter (with Picasso’s move away from portraiture), or style (with the hard-edged, hermetic idiom he and Braque adopted).

Laurencin suddenly found herself in the position of needing to claim a new place for herself in the avant-garde. At this moment, she chose to draw from the other major stylistic force in the avant-garde: Fauvism. In *Apollinaire and His Friends*, she identified a space between Fauvism and Cubism and called it her own.

### The Idyllic, the Classical and the Feminine

*Apollinaire and His Friends* responds directly to two recent, equally ambitious avant-garde paintings: Matisse’s *Bonheur de Vivre*, shown to a mixed reception at the 1906 Salon d’Automne, and Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, completed in 1907. Laurencin’s painting

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94 Cottington. David Cottington’s scholarship has helped identify the stylistic difference between what he terms the “Salon Cubists” – those who found necessary to show their works at the Salon d’Automne and the Salon des Indépendants, like Gleizes, Metizinger the Delaunay’s and Laurencin, and those like Picasso and Braque who were supported by gallerists and showed exclusively in galleries. Cottington argues that the economic pressures of having to appeal to buyers at the Salon had a direct impact on the stylistic developments that Cubism underwent at the ends of these Salon Cubists. He argues that the hierarchy of Cubist painters, with Picasso and Braque at the top, was established not because of artistic genius but because of economic circumstance.

95 *The Demoiselles* was not shown publically for several years, but instead remained in Picasso’s studio and was shown only to select visitors. This serves as another link between this painting and Laurencin’s artist-group.
refers to the well-known competition between these two male leaders of the dominant avant-garde movements in Paris during this period, a rivalry that has been well documented by historians, and in memoirs such as Stein’s.\textsuperscript{96} Both Picasso and Matisse sought to claim a certain authority within the avant-garde by experimenting with, and commenting upon, the academic tradition in these works. With \textit{Apollinaire and His Friends}, Laurencin made her own bid to also participate in and comment on that rivalry in ways hitherto overlooked by scholars.

Arguably, both Picasso’s \textit{Demoiselles} and Laurencin’s \textit{Apollinaire and His Friends} should be read as responses to the initial gambit of Matisse’s \textit{Bonheur de Vivre}.\textsuperscript{97} The latter painting features several nudes, set in a wooded landscape. The figures themselves are a showcase of classical motifs: Odalisques, Pans, and Venuses abound. However, Matisse’s infamous figural distortions—as bodies integrate into the ground, or fuse with one another—and the boldly non-mimetic color scheme make the source material mutate into a commentary on the continuing legitimacy of the classical tradition in modern painting. The extreme stylization and palette subvert mimesis in favor of decorative balance, inverting the traditional approach to landscape embodied by Claude Lorrain and other artists associated with the genres of classicizing or pastoral landscapes.\textsuperscript{98}

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\textsuperscript{96} Stein, 29.

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Bonheur de Vivre} measures at 69x94.76 cm. Picasso’s \textit{Demoiselle’s d’Avignon} is of a similar size at 96x92 inches and Laurencin’s \textit{Apollinaire and His Friends} is only slightly smaller – 82x124cm.

\textsuperscript{98} Werth, 152. The history of \textit{Bonheur} and its reception are tied to a specifically French conception of classicism and its national affiliations. Alastair Wright has recently addressed the complex, dual appropriation and subversion of the classical, visible in Matisse’s grand painting. The French Academy understood itself to be the protector of culture and tradition, inheritors of the classical tradition after Italy at the end of the Renaissance. By extension, the classical came to be associated with the French nation itself. Both Alastair Wright and Margaret Werth have observed that Matisse’s quotation of classical precedents in a Fauvist style was a highly radical act, and extremely problematic for Salon audiences.\textsuperscript{98} Such socio-historical context also relates to Laurencin’s work. Her choice to draw upon themes of the classical and the pastoral in \textit{Apollinaire and His Friends} allowed her to make a
Beyond an affront to tradition, recently scholars have linked the role of the classical in the *Bonheur* to larger issues of artistic identity. Alastair Wright, for example, has examined the critical backlash after the *Bonheur’s* initial reception in detail. As he points out, what critics struggled with most about this painting were its apparent stylistic disunity, and the incongruity of its classical references. Critics of the day identified references to Ingres (both his 1856 painting *The Source* and his 1862 work *The Golden Age*), Paul Gauguin, Maurice Denis, and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, among others. To most critics who visited the 1906 Salon d’Automne, by combining this haphazard collection of references, Matisse muddled his presentation of the classical and, by extension, his own artistic identity. The classical was the vocabulary through which it was commonly believed that French painters defined themselves in relation to the longstanding beaux-arts tradition. Wright observes that Matisse’s stylistic wandering was equated in the mind of the critics to a “failure of artistic self- hood.”\(^{99}\) In a parallel point, Margaret Werth has observed that to represent the idyll at this time was to claim a specific artistic and cultural authority. According to Werth’s reading of the *Bonheur de Vivre*, Matisse’s painting is decidedly anti-idyllic: he co-opts the imagery of the idyll, but inverts it, thus making commentary on the tradition of this imagery and its legacy in modern art.

The negative critical response to the *Bonheur de Vivre* shows that in this period, an artist’s handling of the classical and the idyll were perceived in close relation to his (or her)

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\(^{99}\) Ibid., 96. Margaret Werth identifies a similar relationship between self-identity and the subject of Matisse’s painting. Beyond the classical, Werth specifically addresses the *Bonheur de Vivre* in relation to the utopic tradition of the idyll. She observes that in the 19th century: “To represent Idyll was to hand down ancestral myths, asserting the artist’s cultural authority and command of the orders of sex and gender – even if he [or she] chose to subvert or debunk them. [Sic] The artist’s own bodily, gendered and sexual identity mattered in the competition for reputation and professional success; legitimating the artist’s claim to speak the idyllic, which was after all, the claim to speak about the naturalness of ones origins of society and culture – and thus the origins of language, of art itself.” 96.
professional identity. The radical treatment of the idyllic tradition in Matisse’s painting laid a foundation that allowed Laurencin, by making reference to this notorious work, to make her own statement about her relation to the same tradition with which Matisse grappled. As a female artist continually struggling to hold on to a position of import in a male-dominated environment, Laurencin interjected her own idyll, taking that tradition and, like Matisse, turning it on its head.

Both Laurencin and Matisse privilege the “decorative” in their paintings: they sacrifice mimetic or naturalistic details in for the sake of overall compositional harmony and balance. However, the gender associations of the decorative would have been read quite differently in relation to these two artists and their paintings. Because of its longstanding association with the making of, applied art for domestic use, the decorative was viewed during this period as a “feminine” mode. However, an increasing number of male artists, including Matisse, came to revalue decoration, linking it to an abstracting approach to representation. If for Matisse the decorative was something to both co-opt and disown, Laurencin, by virtue of her gender, had a different relation to this principle: she could use the decorative to affirm her identity as both artist and woman. Laurencin could more easily access the decorative, capitalizing on its relation to artifice and fantasy—yet in so doing, she also risked simplifying the relation of her two identities, “artist” and “woman.”

Like the tradition of the idyll, group portraiture was a powerful tool that artists could use to define the parameters of their professional identities. The tradition of the idyll allowed

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101 Before she began her studies at the Académie Humbert, Laurencin was a student at the Sevres School where she studied decorative porcelain painting. Thus her appropriation of the decorative is also a reference to her unique artistic training.
painters to insert themselves into the canon of art history; the artist-group portrait allowed them to construct a professional identity. Laurencin’s choice to combine these two genres allowed her to assert her skill as an artist, and define her relation to the avant-garde. Furthermore, it allowed her to put forth her own image of an ideal artistic community, one in which her roles as woman and artist could be resolved, in which professional and gender identities could be temporarily assumed.

Importantly, Laurencin’s choice to point to Matisse through these references to the classical, the idyll and the decorative does not preclude a continuing dialogue with Cubism. Through his now-famous Demoiselles, Picasso, too, participated in this avant-garde engagement with tradition. Several of the infamously angular female bodies in this picture make reference to the classical nude, striking the pose of an Odalisque or a Venus. Cottington has observed that, as with Matisse, in the Demoiselles Picasso gives primacy to overall compositional harmony, manipulating the bodies of his figures to achieve a balanced composition. The same emphasis on overall balance can be seen in Apollinaire and His Friends, where the bodies of the figures are abstracted or in some cases eliminated from the canvas for the sake of the flow and harmony of the canvas as a whole. The distortion of the figure is a critical element of the stylistic avant-gardism of all three works.

Further commonalities between Laurencin’s work and Picasso’s Demoiselles, visually link her painting to his, and affirm her insider status as one of the chosen few who had access to his work as it hung in his studio. In particular, we might note the similar compositional structure of the two paintings. One hallmark of Picasso’s painting is the compression of space; preparatory sketches reveal that he increasingly emphasized this quality over successive iterations of the
composition (Fig. 34). While the perspectival illusionism of *Apollinaire and His Friends* is more traditionally mimetic than *Demoiselles*, a preparatory sketch of Laurencin’s group portrait shows a similar progression toward a compact composition (Fig. 35). In the sketch for *Apollinaire and His Friends*, the bodies of each of the figures inhabit their own individual space, and the landscape and frame elements are more clearly defined. In the final version of the painting, there is an emphasis on flatness, making shallower the space that contains the figures. Where in the earlier version each figure’s body was whole and contained, in the final painting they are abstracted, reduced to only their faces and essential portions of bodies. The flat landscape appearing behind them threatens to push the figures past the proscenium of the framing curtains and into the viewer’s space.

Laurencin also makes direct reference to the *Demoiselles* through two key elements in her picture. The first is the drapery that envelopes the “Stein” figure, its anti-gravitational swirling around the bodies of the three “graces” and echoing of the curvature of the curtain: a witty quotation of the curtains that frame the *Demoiselles*. Both *Apollinaire and His Friends* and the *Demoiselles* feature a figure to the right of the canvas whose body melds with the drapery she holds in a way that asks the viewer to reconcile an illogical spatial relationship. Second, both artists use the outward gaze of the depicted figures to make the viewer aware that her gaze is met: both works place the viewer in a position of seeing while simultaneously being seen. Of course, what seems particularly telling about this comparison are the differences in the artists’ characterizations of the female body. Picasso’s confrontational nudes are anonymous, and rendered grotesque. Laurencin, on the other hand, puts herself and to her peers in the position of Picasso’s “Odalisques.”
The fact that Laurencin applied the modernist distortion and abstraction she found in the work of Matisse and Picasso to the bodies and faces of her friends and associates is part of what makes her approach unique. Laurencin’s choice to aestheticize these portraits seems to function as an assertion of power over her fellow artists, because, like Lubar observed in Picasso’s portrait of *Gertrude Stein* the locus of control. However, this approach might also be read as one intended to make the viewer aware, once again, of the instability of her figures’ identities. As the viewer attempts to visually reconcile the illogical image of a swirl of fabric that substitutes for Gertrude Stein’s body, or the way that Picasso’s torso disappears under his shoulders, so too the role of each figure in relation to the larger group remains unresolved. Are these performers in a tableau, a group of friends on a country outing, or artists posing in a studio? While her colleagues gradually drifted away from the genre of portraiture, Laurencin continued to experiment with the relationship between portraiture and identity.

**The Power of the “Purely” Feminine**

Rather than a straightforward capitulation to the position of the *femme-peintre*, *Apollinaire and His Friends* makes manifest Laurencin’s choice to intentionally cultivate a reading of her work as “feminine,” by playing up elements of the decorative and signifiers of femininity in the style of the paintings itself. Far from quietly accepting the role of the *femme-peintre*, *Apollinaire and His Friends* is evidence of Laurencin’s redoubled her efforts to carve out a space for herself at the forefront of the avant-garde. As Picasso and Braque began to work in a partnership under the Kahnweiler contract, Laurencin continued to associate with the *bande à Picasso* publicly, but her work no longer aligned stylistically with the new direction of Cubism. She continued to develop a practice built on those aspects of early Cubism that centered
on the complex relationship between image and sitter in portraiture. It seems that the critical response to her work, and the gendered rhetoric that the critics used to describe it, motivated Laurencin to adapt her style and approach. Laurencin was aware of the gendered rhetoric applied to her work, and chose to strategically it as a form of cultural capital; she folded her “femininity” into her avant-garde practice, rather than attempting to ignore it.

In this way, *Apollinaire and His Friends* marks a key shift in Laurencin’s approach. *Group of Artists* indicates an ambivalence toward her self-image that appears to have dropped out of the second group portrait. In *Group of Artists*, she depicts herself as austere, stiff, and sharp-eyed; yet the flower she holds links her to the hyper-feminine figure of Olivier. This duality suggests that Laurencin was not yet sure whether the roles of “woman” and “painter” could be resolved in her life or in her paintings. As visitors to the Stein house began to see this work, and critics at the Salon des Indépendants began to celebrate Laurencin as a painter, she suddenly found herself in the public sphere. The critical response that followed may or may not have inspired Laurencin’s approach to painting *Apollinaire and His Friends*, but the pressure to define herself in relation to male avant-garde practice was certainly heightened by the attention she received in the press.

Like Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, and *Carnival at the Bistro*, Laurencin’s work of this period suggests an attempt to express her artistic identity both through the subject and the style of her painting. In *Apollinaire and His Friends*, Laurencin resolves the conflicting identities of artist and muse, a conflict that *Group of Artists* shows to the viewer, but leaves unresolved. The solution to this conflict lies in her assumption of a more conventional feminine identity. The emphasis on the arabesque and on long, flowing lines; the fluid brushstrokes, which mimic watercolor (a medium associated with lady painters); and the delicacy of the palette reinforce
traditional feminine stereotypes. The references to floral still-life painting, and the sensual delicate treatment of Laurencin’s own body, also call to mind culturally-established signifiers of femininity.

The relationship between artifice, the feminine and the decorative as these terms were understood by Laurencin’s audience is key. One meaning of the decorative in this period would relate it to a Rococo style, closely associated with “feminine” style and subject matter. Laurencin actively sought to affiliate herself with this aspect of the decorative, claiming a strong affinity for the Rococo throughout her career in memoirs and interviews. Bridget Elliot has observed that at the start of the twentieth century, Laurencin and her audience would have shared an understanding of the decorative mediated by nineteenth-century literature and the imagery of authors like Oscar Wilde, and themes of artifice and invention. Elliott reads Laurencin’s use of the arabesque as a subversive gesture, characterizing “Laurencin’s engagement with the decorative as another way of displaying femininity and rendering it problematic.”

Elliott’s analysis is focused primarily on Laurencin’s later work of the 1930s; however, she observes that Laurencin first began to utilize the arabesque in her Diana at the Hunt of 1908, which features the long, flowing arabesque throughout. This emphasis on the arabesque serves the dual function of placing emphasis on the femininity of Laurencin’s style, while also drawing upon a discourse of artificiality associated with the decorative. The viewer is made aware of the

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103 Todd, 64.
104 Elliot, 94.
105 Elliot points out that fantasy is also a key component of this work. The animal that Diana rides is neither horse nor deer but some hybrid. Its tale grows into decorative foliage winding across the canvas, foliage that sprouts a dog as well as flowers. Apollinaire and His Friends, while less whimsical, also features elements of the fantastical and inventive, in the ambiguous body of the large cat and the ethereal sweep of the Stein figure’s drapery. Both works, by way of their treatment of the arabesque, informs the viewer of their fantastical, constructed nature.
constructed and artificial nature of the feminine signifiers, like the arabesque, that Laurencin appropriates.

The visible effort to cultivate a style in *Apollinaire and His Friends* that would read to her audience as “feminine” is also evident in facture of the painting. Her application of paint is distinct from works produced earlier, and is the first example of the fluid, delicate style that would become a signature in her later career. Returning to her *Artemis* and *Diana at the Hunt*, these works and the *Group of Artists* all feature a consistently expressive and primitivizing style with an emphasis on modeling and a strong use of line. *Apollinaire and His Friends*, on the other hand, features a more constrained palette, and a more delicate handling of paint. There is still a strong sense of flatness, but the delicate application of paint that mimics the look of watercolor marks a stylistic shift. There is also a continued return to the curve of the arabesque in the curtains, the fabric that encircles the Gertrude Stein figure, the shape of the cat’s neck, and in Laurencin’s own gown. Arguably, these stylistic elements together, paired with Laurencin’s rather feminized self-image, encourage the viewer to read Laurencin’s painting as feminine.

This is not to say that Laurencin’s approach to gender in this painting is simple. First, we may note that all of the figures in the canvas, including the male figures, are treated with the same “feminizing” aesthetic. Given that the bodies of most of the figures are abstracted or blocked from view, we see few distinctions between male and female bodies. The exceptions are the visible figures of Apollinaire, Olivier and Laurencin. As in *Group of Artists*, Laurencin and Olivier are presented as pendant figures: the serpentine line of Olivier’s body and the sharp turn of her neck redoubles the emphasis of the curvature of Laurencin’s leg and her own three-quarter turn toward the viewer. Laurencin’s figure is the strongest point of interest, as the most erotically charged, clearly defined and closest to the canvas, but the echo of Olivier’s form reiterates its
sensual power. Apollinaire, on the other hand, stands alone. He is apparently in a position of honor as the figure at the center, the focus of the apotheosis. However, the treatment of his figure frustrates such a reading. His expression is pale (as is Picasso’s directly behind him), and his shoulders are slopped and drooping. The result is that both male figures project a similar frailty. In earlier *Group of Artists*, the figure of Apollinaire is the bulkiest of the four, weighty with broad squared shoulders, a strong, square jaw and an almost robust look. Here, his face is thinner, and the book, which he previously held up as if caught in the act of reading, now hangs loosely between his legs.\(^{106}\) This is not to suggest that Laurencin equated femininity to physical weakness, but rather that in her representation of Apollinaire (and all of the men in the canvas, for that matter) she suppressed traditional signifiers of masculinity. Still, the presence of these male figures, and Apollinaire’s position of honor in the midst of apotheosis, continue to function as potential symbols of masculine virility.

These ambiguities leave the gender politics of the painting in a state of unresolved tension. Picasso and Apollinaire are both in positions of power in terms of the painting’s composition, but the stability of their masculinity comes into question. This is congruent with the larger theme of performed or constructed identity visible throughout the painting. They are “playing the part” of male artists, but the rendering of their bodies signals the artificiality of this status. Furthermore, Laurencin affords her own figure the most power within the canvas. She is the most erotically powerful and maintains the strongest hold over the viewer’s gaze, in spite of Apollinaire’s centrality in the canvas. This gesture enforces Laurencin’s strategic use of the feminine, and the role the muse, as tools readily available for her use.

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\(^{106}\) The triangular shape that the book and Apollinaire’s hands create might also be a reference to female genitalia. In this sense, Laurencin literally masks the locus of Apollinaire’s virility with a signifier of the female sex.
Laurencin’s “feminine” style allowed her to claim a unique space within the male dominated avant-garde: distinct from both Cubism and Fauvism, it nevertheless draws upon both. Just as Picasso found in Iberian masks a motif that could pictorially resolve the threat of otherness and difference that he experienced when looking at Stein, Laurencin found in the decorative a visual vocabulary that could mark her unique experience as female painter—a distinctive way of being avant-garde. Yet Laurencin also treats “femininity” here as an identity that can be worn or cast off. This is most poignantly expressed in Laurencin’s rendering of her own body. The elegant, elongated foot that peeps from beneath her gown, the flounce of the bow at the back of her dress, the skirt that simultaneously conceals and exposes the precise curve of her leg highlight the manufactured nature of her image, of her womanliness. She is both the ideal muse and the painter of the work. As the most prominent figure in the canvas, Laurencin subtly lays claim to the authority and power of both roles.

*Apollinaire and His Friends* is an important work in Laurencin’s oeuvre because it lays the groundwork for the importance of the performative in her later works. As if watching a theatrical performance, the viewer becomes complicit in the suspension of disbelief that allows the figures to inhabit their various roles. What at first presents itself as a painting of a gathering of real people in a natural setting upon further examination reveals itself to be instead a frankly artificial collection of painted signs and quotations. Framed by curtains and sandwiched between the flat backdrop of an imagined landscape and the edge of the stage or canvas, these performers play-act the roles they are given here. *Apollinaire and His Friends* reveals to the viewer that identity is performed, a truth of which Laurencin, as a female painter looking to make her mark in a contested avant-garde, was only too aware.
CONCLUSION

My endeavor with this project has been to identify the ideological framework that underpins Marie Laurencin’s artist-group portraits. By identifying their conceptual and aesthetic links to the works of male avant-garde practitioners, including Matisse and Picasso, I have shown that these “simple” paintings are in fact complex, carefully-constructed works. Laurencin linked both paintings to several artistic traditions, but these references are charged with a particular gender politic—a statement on the part of the artist about her own identity as a female artist, and a commentary on gender identity at large. The next logical question to ask then would be if similar tendencies are operative in other works in Laurencin’s oeuvre. Can her mobilization of a “feminine” style, and capitalization on the rhetoric of the decorative, function in the same subversive way in her pastel paintings of women dancing in the forest? In her portraits of bourgeois Parisiennes? I believe these early artist-group portraits are not unique in Laurencin’s body of work; my analysis might serve as a model through which the entirety of her oeuvre might be reconsidered.

As we have seen, scholars like Paula Birnbaum and Gill Perry have been critical of Laurencin’s later works, arguing that she sacrificed artistic integrity in favor of developing a marketable style. It is true that later in her career, Laurencin become associated with a feminine style that went beyond avant-garde painting to the domains of theater and fashion. Her costume and set designs for the Ballet Russes’ Les Biches (“The Does”) exemplifies this. The ballet was extremely well received, and one critic observed that he believed that Laurencin’s aesthetic would shape the look of modern women’s style in the next decade.\(^\text{107}\) By this point in her career,\(^\text{107}\) Gere, 22.
Laurencin’s style had become fully conflated with the image of the modern woman. What we might think of as the *Biches* aesthetic is certainly marketable. She repeated images of slender, young, stylish ladies ad infinitum; their seemingly interchangeable physiognomies decreases our sense of their individuality. This genre—the “Laurencin”—has been read either as a “branding” move on Laurencin’s part, or as evidence of her lack of originality and artistic skill. Let’s shift the conversation and afford Laurencin the benefit of the doubt; let’s assume that this gesture was an intentional one, and examine its implications. Might it be that Laurencin’s standardized approach to the female figure might be a commentary on the shared experience of the modern woman? Does this uniformity instead speak to the commodification of the modern woman?

As we have seen, Laurencin did not outwardly express any allegiance to feminism—quite the contrary. However, it can be misleading to assume that “feminism” meant the same thing to female painters in the inter-war period in Paris that it does today. Just because Laurencin wanted to distance herself from the political ideologies of her feminist peers does not mean that she was not deeply motivated by issues of gender identity, or that she might have addressed those issues in her work. These are just some of the possibilities; I raise these questions to highlight how much work is still to be done before the contributions of this prolific artist are fully understood.
ILLUSTRATIONS

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