

## DeLouche on Roos Rosa de Carvalho (2017)

Roos Rosa de Carvalho, Fleur. *Prints in Paris 1900: From Elite to the Street*. Yale UP, 2017, pp. 192, ISBN 978-0-3002-2913-4

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The period known as the fin de siècle witnessed an explosion of prints in France, from the colored lithograph posters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, to graphic illustrations in popular magazines by Félix Vallotton, to fine-art impressions and limited-edition books by Pierre Bonnard. New printmaking technologies—including advancements in lightweight zinc and aluminum sheets, color registration, scale, and photomechanical relief-printing—allowed for graphics that could be colorful, sizable, and circulated on a mass level. The easing of censorship laws in 1881 meant that prints were no longer inspected prior to publication and dissemination. Modern prints, seen everywhere in Paris, enjoyed an immense popularity with the public. Indeed, recognizing the preponderance of prints, contemporaries termed theirs “the paper age,” as in Vallotton’s graphic, *L’Âge du papier*, that graced the cover of a popular Parisian weekly periodical in 1898. The wide dissemination of these images and their broad appeal have led many scholars to describe fin-de-siècle prints as functioning principally as a “democratic” medium, a popular and commercial art that reached a large audience.

In *Prints in Paris 1900: From Elite to the Street*, Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho seeks to complicate this idea by examining the fin-de-siècle print’s overall field of cultural production. She wrote this catalogue and curated the blockbuster exhibition *Prints in Paris 1900* at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (3 March to 11 June 2017), which showcased a selection from the museum’s collection of some 1,800 French prints, posters, and books. Her catalogue addresses three questions: Which public, exactly, was fascinated by prints? How did these prints function in society? And is there evidence of a hierarchy within the extensive production of prints circa 1900? To answer these questions, she places prints in cultural, historical, and sociological perspective and delves into the intersecting roles of artists, critics, dealers, collectors, publishers, and neighborhoods.

The central dynamic of Roos Rosa de Carvalho’s catalogue is the interplay between private and public in the world of fin-de-siècle prints. She builds her study around two concurrent and overlapping trends: prints made for an elite group and images destined for the street. She begins by examining the private individuals who amassed impressive collections of modern prints, enjoyed in the seclusion of domestic interiors, organized and preserved in specially made furniture. These *amateurs d’estampe* voraciously collected both fine-art editions and mass-produced posters. These elite connoisseurs helped drive the appreciation of the modern print and ideas about the perfect impression. Roos Rosa de Carvalho emphasizes that the number of these collectors was in fact extremely small. Limited-edition impressions made by modern printmakers were specifically circulated among a narrow coterie of artists, scholars, critics, and dealers. She notes that these elites especially valued prints with smaller editions, ensuring their exclusivity in the face of rising mass printing.

Outside the private cabinets of these collectors, prints covered Parisian kiosks and walls, and appeared in magazines, menus, and sheet music. Such ephemera altered the daily sensory experiences of Parisians, rich and poor. These striking popular prints served a number of purposes, from the tacit promotion of the products of developed consumer and celebrity culture, to functioning as leisure-time attractions in and of themselves. As Roos Rosa de Carvalho notes, the private and public worlds of the fin-de-siècle print often merged—fervent collectors removed freshly pasted posters from the kiosks and spirited them away into their domestic interiors, and printmakers like Jules Chéret, famous for popular mass-produced billboards, designed large artistic *estampes murales*, often framed and mounted on canvas, specifically to decorate the private home.

Roos Rosa de Carvalho insists that prints cannot be viewed in isolation from other art forms. This is especially true of the fin-de-siècle print, considering the intense interconnection of the arts circa 1900, including within the Art Nouveau movement, which imagined the fine arts and applied arts working in tandem. She considers, for instance, the detailed book bindings and elaborate furniture in which elite collectors stored their prints. Such connections with other arts points to will be one exciting area of research for future historians of prints.

Since contextualizing the works is crucial to Roos Rosa de Carvalho, the book includes in the appendix a useful map of Paris circa 1900 locating the sites of important printers, dealers, galleries, entertainment venues, and artists’ studios. The map underscores that, unsurprisingly, Montmartre was the hotbed of fin-de-siècle print production, with ateliers, cabarets, and *imprimeries* sharing the neighborhood and influencing each other.

As curator, Roos Rosa de Carvalho brilliantly laid out her ideas in the exhibition, which was organized over two floors. It

explored the dynamic of private and public in fin-de-siècle prints by recreating the original context in which they were seen, promoted, and sold. On the first floor, viewers entered the private realm of fin-de-siècle collectors of prints. Furniture and the special prints it contained were displayed in dimly lit and confined spaces with parquet flooring and simulated Oriental rugs. The space encouraged intimacy and contemplation, drawing viewers in to view the exceptional prints from up close. Space opened up on the second floor to recreate the public urban experience of prints. Visitors walked among the massive, colorful posters that papered the Parisian environment during the fin de siècle. For example, a period photograph of a Parisian building plastered with posters was reproduced to scale on a multi-story-high wall of the exhibition and actual prints are overlaid, revealing the riot of color and eye-catching designs that met fin-de-siècle viewers.

With 160 color images, this oversized catalogue is lavishly illustrated, as is befitting a book on this subject. Moreover, each book comes with a reproduction of Vallotton's woodcut *La paresse* (1896) for the collection of budding modern-day *amateurs d'estampes*. The catalogue, available in English, French, Dutch, and German editions, is a must for historians of visual culture, university libraries, museum curators, and collectors and aficionados of prints.

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