Research Proposal
Art History Capstone
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Research Question and Hypothesis

The goal of my capstone paper is to investigate the ways in which Manet, Degas, and Toulouse-Lautrec reconciled their privileged, and in the case of Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, aristocratic backgrounds with their desire to forge a new path in art –one that was grounded in the new age of Parisian modernity and separate from the established ideals and customs of French academic art. In this paper, I will argue that although Manet, Degas, and Toulouse-Lautrec sought to establish themselves as a new school of art, they relied on many biblical and classical allusions, subject matter, and motifs in order to establish artistic legitimacy, communicate the nuances of their aesthetic intentions, and attract wealthy patrons and buyers.

Significance

I have decided to focus on these three artists as have had from similar yet unique socio-economic upbringings. Both Manet and Degas were raised in well-respected, upper-middle class families, however both experienced significant economic downturns later in life. Manet's father was a highly regarded judge who later declared bankruptcy and Degas' family – well-established, affluent, and tied to French aristocracy – spiraled into severe debt during the middle of Degas' career. Toulouse-Lautrec was born into a wealthy and aristocratic family but was denounced and marginalized due to both his physical disability and his career as an artist. Thus, these artists provide an interesting perspective through which to investigate how class relations are translated into art, and how high and low

culture can be conciliated. Furthermore, these three artists are also regarded as the leaders of the Impressionist artists, and their work had significant impact on Monet, Sisley, Pissarro, Cassatt, and Renoir.

There has been significant research and literature produced regarding the art and legacy of the Impressionists, as well art of the late 19th century in general. However, much of the work that has been done focuses on ways in which the Impressionists rejected the art of the Salon and the Académie des Beaux-Arts in favor of a new, modern way of painting and avant-garde subject matter. My paper will discuss how the artist's desire to cultivate a new vision of art grounded in modernity led them to refer to the classical works that were idolized by the very institutions that they were working to distance themselves from. Furthermore, my paper will incorporate the theories and writings of sociologists of art, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Janet Wolff, and Howard Becker, and other social theorists and thinkers, such as Marx and Gramsci. This synthesis of art history and sociology will hopefully bring a unique perspective to this already-saturated field of study and will also allow for an understanding of the broader social impact that these artists caused. For example, I will be investigating questions such as whether these Impressionists' art was truly egalitarian, or if, as a result on their use of classical and highbrow allusions, the working-class public was prevented from understanding the subtle innuendos within their work. This paper will also raise the broader questions of whether art is inherently a democratic force, or if it is works to reinforce the tastes of the elites and the dichotomy between high and low culture.

Methodology

As this paper focuses on the work of deceased artists, I will mainly be utilizing historical sources and the literature of scholars working in the field of Impressionism and 19th century French art. I will also rely on biographical information to understand the ways in which Manet's, Degas's, and Toulouse-Lautrec's familial backgrounds, social networks, and personal experiences influenced their work and attitudes towards art. As mentioned previously, my paper will also include sociological and Marxist perspectives and theory to find an answer to my research questions.

I am currently compiling research from sources on both the art of the Impressionists and the sociology of art. By early October, I aim to have an outline of my paper and by mid November, a completed first draft. This will allow me a month for my advisor(s) to read my paper, give feedback, and for me to complete my revisions by the December deadline.

Result

By the end of this process, I hope to have provided a clear and insightful account of how class issues manifest within the art of Manet, Degas, and Toulouse-Lautrec, as well as a perceptive synthesis of sociological theory and art historical knowledge. I also hope to provide readers with a clear understanding of why and how art history can provide an exceptional account of the ways in which individuals navigate, compete, and interact within a society, and how aesthetic tastes are established, preserved, and forgotten.