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The Green Fairy Beckons



Figure 1: *Still Life with Absinthe* [detail] (1887) Vincent Van Gogh

Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe. —Ernest Hemingway

Absinthe was an obsession in the 19th century. Alfred Jarry called the alcohol “holy water” and the “essence of life” (Adam 133).

Toulouse-Lautrec created a drink called the Maiden Blush that was a mixture of absinthe, mandarin, bitters, red wine and

champagne. Absinthe was “popular among bohemians, dandies,

and artists since the 1830's and became a legitimate avant'garde subject for painters fairly quickly” (Young 248). In Paris there was even a “l'heure verte (the green [cocktail] house)” which was a daily event (Strang 1590). However there was a dark side to this liquid. The chemicals in absinthe were known to cause people to go mad. Absinthe is present in paintings from the Impressionist era and the early 20th century. Jean-François Raffaëlli's painting *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe*, Edgar Dega's *L'Absinthe* and Henri Privat-Livemont's Art Nouveau poster *Absinthe Robette* all contain absinthe as a central theme. Raffaëlli and Degas look at the lower class and harmful effects of absinthe while Privat-Livemont creates a sensual image of absinthe for consumers. Absinthe was present in the life of 19th century artists, whether they drank it or not and their opinion of absinthe dictated their representation of the drink.

Absinthe was prepared in the following way: 30 ml of absinthe was added with cold water and a sugar cube into a special glass. It was made up of alcohol, wormwood and anise and contained an alcohol level of 75%. It was a green color because the oils and plants were suspended in the alcohol, and would turn yellow when the cold water was added. This color change allowed artists to portray absinthe using yellow or green or a mixture. Stephen Eskilson describes drinking absinthe as “an art in itself, as water was strained into the drink through a sugar cube supported by a spoon” (Eskilson 67).

Both *L'Absinthe* and *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe* are Impressionist paintings. *L'Absinthe* appeared in the third Impressionist exhibition in 1877 and *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe* was displayed in the sixth exhibition in 1881. Though both paintings show a snapshot of life, they are slow snapshots. They seem to both exist within dead time. Absinthe was popular during the entirety of the era of Impressionism. It touched multiple Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters. Absinthe becomes what the Impressionist wishes it to be in his/her painting. In the case of Degas and Raffaëlli, as well as Privat-Livemont, the absinthe becomes the topic of the painting, which shows its influence on the artists.

Edgar Dega's *L'Absinthe* (Figure 2) places the audience into what seems to be the Café Nouvelle Athenes, which was considered a meeting-place for the Impressionists. The models include Marcellin Desboutin, who was a painter and engraver. Next to Desboutin is the actress Ellen Andree, who performed at the music venue the Elysee Montmatre. While Desboutin is “drinking a soft drink” Andree is drinking absinthe (Morse-Jones 56). Andree recollects saying, “I am sitting in front of an absinthe. Desboutin in front of a soft drink—what a switch!” (qtd. in Morse-Jones 56). She also referred to them looking like “a couple of idiots!” (Morse-Jones 56). Andree has become the female version of a male bohemian because she is drinking absinthe

(Morse Jones 56). Morse-Jones writes Degas had an “aversion to alcoholism” and his painting shows this point of view (Morse Jones 56). Edgar Degas therefore is commenting on both the social implications of absinthe as well as the physical effects of absinthe. Andree is staring at nothing in particular with sunken, dead eyes. The whole painting has a lifeless, lethargic quality to it. Those looking at the painting experience the woman’s view on the world.



Figure 2: *L'Absinthe* (1876)
Edgar Degas

L'Absinthe was not always known by that title. It was called *Dans un Café* at the 2nd Impressionist exhibition, and Degas referred to it as *Helene et deschoutin dans un Café*, but in letters he called it *Interieur du Café*. The fact that it was eventually titled *L'Absinthe* or simply *Absinthe* changed the entire meaning of the work. If it was called *Interior of Café* or *In a Café* the focus wouldn't be on the absinthe; instead it would be centered on the setting. When the focus is on specifically the absinthe and the effect it is having on the woman, the painting takes on a whole new meaning. It is instead highlighting the danger of absinthe and the effect it has on the user. Critics called it a “very disgusting novelty of subject” (Morse-Jones 52). This is referring to the representation of the poor drinker. Theodore Duret, an avant-garde art critic, described the painting as a “perfect epitome of a class of shady individuals who spend their lives in the cafes of Paris, trifling away their days” (qtd. in Morse-Jones 55). This painting even has a green tinge to it, just like the absinthe.

Marnin Young writes in his article “Heroic Indolence: Realism and the Politics of Time in Jean-François Raffaëlli’s ‘Absinthe Drinkers’” that “Degas’s painting [*L’Absinthe*] likely served as a model for Raffaëlli’s own depiction of the subject” (Young 248). He cites that in *L’Absinthe*, the woman seems more bored by her surroundings “as much as from the drink” and that “absinthe has certainly not ruined her yet” (Young 248). Both Raffaëlli and Degas paint absinthe-stricken individuals not because they drink it themselves but because they wish to demonstrate to the public the effects of absinthe. Raffaëlli’s drinkers are more dependent on the drink than the woman in *L’Absinthe* is. This differs from the goal of Henri Privat-Livemont who creates a positive image for absinthe in his paintings to urge the public to buy absinthe.

Jean-François Raffaëlli was a painter of the lower class. This is exhibited in *Les Buveurs D’Absinthe* (The Absinthe Drinker) (Figure 3). The other title for the painting is *Les déclassés*, which translates to people of inferior status. There are two dejected-looking men of the suburbs sitting outside of a wine shop. The art critic Albert Wolff describes in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* that the people of the suburbs were “most often stupefied by misery” (*Le Figaro* 12). Indeed, these men are not conversing, or having a merry time. Instead they are languidly drinking absinthe and are not even looking at one another. It appears that these men have nothing left in their lives but absinthe. This is clear by the brittle look of the man on the right and the sunken eyes of the man on the left.



Figure 3: *Les buveurs d'absinthe* (Les Déclassés) (1881)
Jean-François Raffaëlli

Absinthe became popular among the lower class in 1881. This was because an infection of phylloxera killed French grapes in the 1870's and the price in wine increased. Absinthe manufacturers began making cheaper absinthe made from beets or grain (Young 249). The men in *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe* are drinking this cheap absinthe.

Raffaëlli prepared for painting *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe* by visiting the “worst neighborhoods to observe the effects of the worst absinthe” (Young 248). He also “observed the effects that one, two, three bad absinthes” produced on him (Young 248). The results were that while the first two created dizziness, the third created a “sort of real madness” (Young 248). He found that the drinker “drifts into a dreamlike state” which is evident in *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe* and in *L'Absinthe* (Young 248). Raffaëlli also discovered through observing drinkers that they were “badly addicted as any drug users” (Young 248). Through Raffaëlli's research it is clear that absinthe was a devastating liquid that tormented its drinkers. *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe* therefore shows two men who have been ruined by absinthe. This is a realistic image because of the research Raffaëlli did. Raffaëlli used art to push for reform against the drink. During this period absinthe was already becoming a public health issue and was called “une correspondance pour charenton” (a ticket to Charenton) which was an insane asylum outside of Paris (Young 247). Sir William Blake Richmond called Dega's *L'Absinthe* a “treatise against drink” (Morse-Jones 54). Both Raffaëlli and Degas seem to take the reform route in their paintings.

Emile Zola's novel *L'Assommoir* (1877) was written four years prior to Raffaëlli's *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe* and a year after Dega's *L'Absinthe*. A passage reads as follows:

“Boche told of a carpenter he had known who had been a drinker of absinthe. The man shed his clothes, went out in the street and danced the polka until he died. That rather struck the ladies as comic, even though it was very sad.” (Zola 361)

This shows that in literature as well as painting, the perils of absinthe were being showcased. It details one side effect of absinthe that had “quasi-hallucinogenic qualities” (Young 249).

L'Assommoir is difficult to translate into English, however it has been translated loosely to mean *The Drunkard*. It details specifically the alcoholism in poverty-stricken areas of Paris, similar to Raffaelli's work.

Henri Privat-Livemont created a different view of absinthe for the public's eye. He was a Belgian artist who created Art Nouveau posters. Art Nouveau was a style that featured flattened space, large blocks of color, heavy contours, Japonist division of the surface and depersonalized figures. (Howard 17). This can be seen in one of his best-known posters *Absinthe Robette* (Figure 4). It features a sensual scene of a beautiful woman holding up a glass of absinthe. There are wispy tendrils of smoke whirring around her and the see-through cloth that covers her body shows just enough to hold the viewer's eye. Stephen Eskilson describes this poster as a “sexual fantasy” in a “sensual atmosphere” (Eskilson 65). This was part of the advertising campaign for absinthe.

Octave Maus said that the Art Nouveau movement of Belgium was centered upon the “beautifying of the objects of daily and practical use” (Howard 34). This poster certainly puts absinthe in a pleasing light as it creates a “serenely dreamy state” that is the “embodiment of temptation by the products of the modern world” (Howard 34).

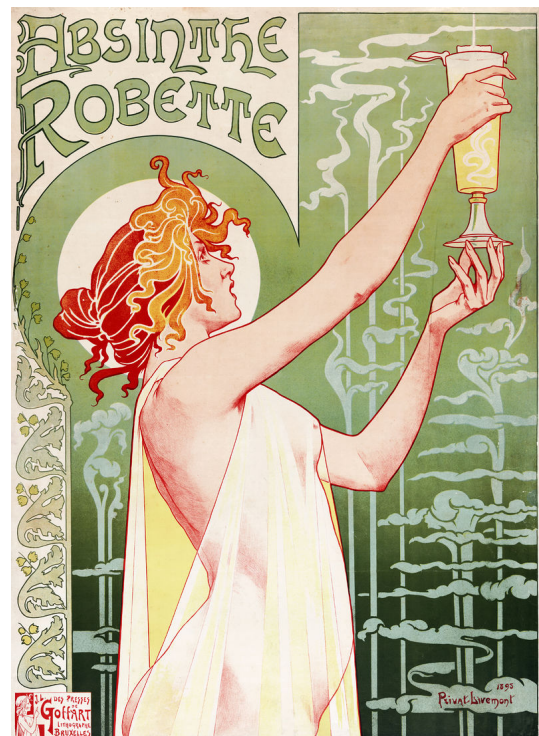


Figure 4: *Absinthe Robette* (1896)
Henri Privat- Livemont

Absinthe was also advertised using the image of the Green Fairy, which added a mystical and magical element to the alcohol.

Absinthe's role in all three of these images is virtually the same. It is there to be enjoyed. The difference, however, is how the artists chose to portray this enjoyment, or lack thereof. The men in Raffaëlli's *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe* have had so many absinthes in their lifetimes that they no longer drink to enjoy. The woman in Degas's *L'Absinthe* is staring off into space completely dead to the world. Privat-Livemont's poster is the embodiment of enjoyment and decadence. The beautiful woman is worshipping this drink. In both Degas's and Raffaëlli's paintings, no one is looking at the drink itself. It has lost the aura of magic that surrounds it in the advertisements. *Absinthe Robette* features a woman looking straight at the drink and *admiring* it. Privat-Livemont is placing the drink on a pedestal while Degas and Raffaëlli place it in the gutter.

Privat-Livemont used woman in his advertisements frequently. Jeremy Howard writes that he “exploited the image of the sensuous, beautiful young woman in fashionable dress and with exotic hairstyle” (34). She has a wonderful figure: her hair is artfully executed and her skin is a bright healthy shade. Compare her to the woman in *L'Absinthe*. Technically they are they same person: a woman who is enjoying absinthe. Degas decides to not portray an idealized aristocrat but a poorer woman who could possibly be a prostitute. Her skin is

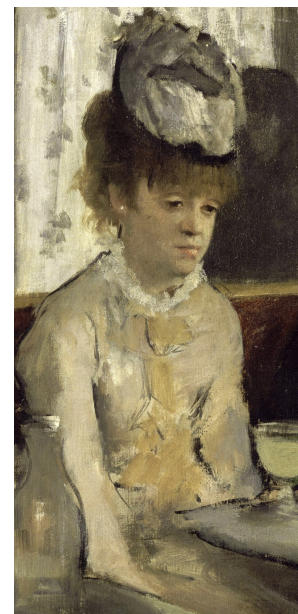
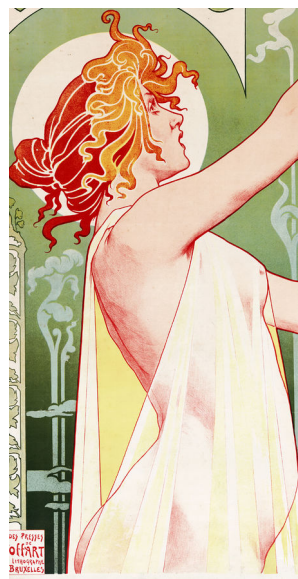


Figure 5 (Left)- *Absinthe Robette* (1896) [detail]
Figure 6 (Right)- *L'Absinthe* (1876) [detail]

yellowed, her eyes are sunken and her clothing is wrinkled and dirty. Both women are drinking the same drink, but the similarities end there. If the woman in *L'Absinthe* is indeed a prostitute than, as Tag Gronberg observes, “there is no trace of seduction” in her body (Morse-Jones 56). She is tired and bored and her skin is an unhealthy color. In Privat-Livemont’s poster, the woman is sexually charged. She has a see through dress and is similar to a goddess. These representations of absinthe drinkers create a different opinion in viewers. While Privat-Livemont’s poster is supposed to attract the eye, *L'Absinthe* is meant to repulse.

Setting is a large factor in how absinthe is portrayed. While Toulouse-Lautrec painted absinthe in the Moulin Rouge and in rich Parisian café’s, Degas painted absinthe in poorer cafes in Paris and Raffaëlli chose to paint it outside of Paris in the even poorer suburbs. In each setting absinthe was being consumed, but the setting itself determined how the painting would be presented. Toulouse-Lautrec’s paintings are bright and colorful. The absinthe in *Monsieur Boileau au café* is an unnatural luminescent green (Figure 7). In contrast, Degas and Raffaëlli’s color palates are muted and rely on browns and darker yellows instead of bright engaging colors.

The color of the absinthe reflects the setting as well as the artist’s feeling towards the alcohol. For instance in *Monsieur Boileau au café* (Figure 7) Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec paints absinthe as a pastel green liquid, reflecting the aristocracy and the enjoyment of the drink. In *The Absinthe Drinker* (Figure 8) Édouard Manet sees it as a pale yellow drink. This is a depressing shade to reflect the destitute drunkard pictured. Pablo Picasso’s absinthe is dark green in *The Absinthe Drinker*, also showing enjoyment (Figure 9). Vincent Van Gogh, who was an intense absinthe drinker, painted it as having a bright yellow shade (Figure 1). He loved absinthe and dedicated a still life to the drink. In *L'Absinthe* Degas’s absinthe is a greenish yellow, similar to the color of urine. In *Les Buveurs D'Absinthe*, Raffaëlli paints absinthe as a yellow drink that is



Figure 7: *Monsieur Boileau au café* [detail] (1893)
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec



Figure 8: *The Absinthe Drinker* [detail] (1859)
Édouard Manet

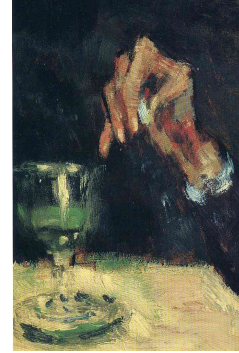


Figure 9: *The Absinthe Drinker* [detail] (1901)
Pablo Picasso

mixed with brown. Privat-Livemont's absinthe in *Absinthe Robette* is an attractive bright yellow color. Obviously all seven of these paintings are portraying the same drink, but each artist views absinthe in a different way. Because absinthe was so prevalent in these men's lives, it became prevalent in their work.

Oscar Wilde said:

"After the first glass of absinthe you see things as you wish they were. After the second you see them as they are not. Finally you see things as they really are, and that is the most horrible thing in the world."

Wilde was yet another artist who enjoyed the company of absinthe. Though he wasn't a painter, absinthe played a large part in his life as well as his work. Absinthe is a curious thing. With all its shortcomings, the drink inspired brilliant artists from Hemingway to Toulouse-Lautrec to Van Gogh to create art. The green fairy that caused people to be sent to asylums and, as described by Zola, dance the polka naked in the street, also influenced countless pieces of art and literature. It was attractively portrayed by Privat-Livemont while realistically represented by Degas and Raffaëlli. The art world should be thankful for such a toxic drink, for without it *The Starry Night* may not be as dreamy.

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