

The Changing Faces of the Paris Salon:
Using a New Dataset to Analyze Portraiture, 1740 -1881

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Abstract

This essay describes a novel dataset that facilitates the quantitative analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth-century French painting. Based on titles listed in the Paris Salon *livrets*, the dataset assigns detailed keywords indicating the content for each of the more than 148,000 paintings shown at the Salon—the principal French art exhibition of the era—from the seventeenth to nineteenth century. To demonstrate the interest and utility of this dataset, we present a case study about a genre that has traditionally been neglected by both art historians and cultural economists: portraiture. Our analysis shows portraiture was ubiquitous, usually representing 27 per cent of all paintings exhibited in a year—more than any other genre. We also trace the changing demographics of sitters. There were, for example, dramatic increases over time in how many images of women were displayed. We also chart the rise of quasi-anonymous portraiture, where names of sitters do not appear in paintings’ titles but audiences from certain social classes could identify subjects. We ultimately demonstrate how quantitative methods can be fruitfully applied to this art historical dataset, which is now available freely online, and is just one of many similar datasets that can be digitized and studied.

Introduction

The Paris Salon was the principal fine arts exhibition venue in France—and arguably throughout Europe—from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. First administered by the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* and later by the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, the juried exhibition has a reactionary reputation in the history of art.¹ It is now perhaps most famous for routinely excluding the Impressionists from its galleries. However, distinctions between sites of innovation and reaction in the nineteenth-century French art world were not clearly delineated. The Impressionists, for example, aimed to show at the Salon and only chose to exhibit on their own under professional and financial duress. The exhibition was, despite its current reputation, the core of French art world, attracted hundreds of thousands of spectators and inspired hundreds of critical essays and articles in the press.²

This research note has three general goals. The first is to introduce a new, now publicly available dataset that captures the full scope of the thousands of works completed by hundreds of artists that were shown at this exhibition. The Whiteley Index, an extraordinary manuscript created by art historian Jon Whiteley, assigns keywords describing the content of each of the more than

¹ Pierre Vaisse, “Reflexions Sur La Fin Du Salon Officiel,” in *Ce Salon a Quoi Tout Se Ramene : Le Salon de Peinture Et de Sculpture, 1791-1890.*, ed. James. Kearns and Pierre. Vaisse (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 117.

² While the Salon was the center of the French art world into the Third Republic, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, venues beyond the exhibition emerged for showing contemporary art. These included Salon-like exhibitions in cities outside of Paris, exhibits at a growing number of private commercial galleries, and group shows—like the Impressionist exhibitions—that developed in response to the perceived restrictiveness of the Salon.

148,000 paintings shown at the Paris Salons.³ This Index, which long languished in the rare books holdings of Oxford’s Sackler Library, has now been digitized and is publicly available.⁴ Second, we aim to demonstrate this dataset’s utility by presenting a high-level case study about portraiture, a genre that has been neglected in both the history of the nineteenth-century European art, as well as in the cultural economics literature dedicated to the visual arts.⁵ Portraiture is also particularly well-suited to analyses linked to text-based data. Portraits’ titles are often more descriptive of the subjects shown—the person or people shown—than in genre or history painting where titles can be more evocative than descriptive. Titles applied at the time of a painting’s first showing (the Salon was principally a venue for new work) is also interesting because one can track the extent to which applied titles engaged with pseudo-anonymity, where names were redacted but the sitters’ faces were clearly on full display. We delved into this topic below. Finally, we hope that our discussion of the data and analyses of portraiture will inspire other scholars to work with the Whiteley Index, either to engage more completely with histories of portraiture or to explore the myriad other research questions facilitated by this data.

Further Information about the Whiteley Index

For each Salon, a *livret*—an exhibition catalog listing the title, artist, and sometimes other information for each work of art, as well as assigning the work a unique number—was published. Whiteley used listed titles in the *livrets* as the basis of his assigned keywords. His categorizations are so detailed that they include the identities of individual portrait sitters. **Figure 1** shows the

³ Jon Whiteley, *Subject Index to Paintings Exhibited at the Paris Salon, 1673–1881* (1993) [Unpublished, deposited at Sackler Library, Oxford].

⁴ To access digitized files go to: <https://github.com/dsg2123/Painting-by-Numbers/tree/main/Data/Whiteley%20Index>

⁵ For art historical overviews of this topic, and discussions of how it has been neglected see: Shearer West, *Portraiture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Marcia Pointon, *Portrayal and the Search for Identity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012)

bottom and top of two pages from the Whiteley Index. The keyword appears before the colon, and the listed numbers indicate the year of the exhibition and number of a work in the catalog. Using the Whiteley Index and the *livrets*, we can, for example, learn that painting number 661 displayed in 1869 (outlined in blue) was an image of “Mme. G” by Edgar Degas. This portrait is now fully identified as *Portrait of Josephine Gaujelin* in the collection of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum [fig 2], which the sitter apparently rejected in 1867 but Degas still chose to display at the 1869 Salon.⁶

Digitizing Whiteley’s index yields a dataset that is unparalleled in its comprehensive coverage of and detail about an enormous sample of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French art—including the 1855 Exhibition Universelle and the Salon des Refusés of 1863. This research note focuses on the approximately 136,000 paintings shown between 1740—when Salons became more regular and the *livrets* are more consistent in their content—and 1881, the year of the last unitary Salon after the state withdrew support for the exhibition.⁷

The size and completeness of the database are exceptional. As a result, the database may easily be used to get general statistics about the nature of the paintings exhibited at any given moment but also allows one to follow trends in the genres that were displayed. The text-based nature of the Whiteley Index also provides the opportunity to analyze quantitatively topics for which the visual inspection of the artwork would actually not be useful. One of the topics developed further on, anonymity, can only be grasped by looking at the titles of the artworks and not by looking at the artworks themselves.

Yet, despite its obvious qualities the database has also shortcomings. The Salon was a

⁶ Richard Linger, “Portrait of Joséphine Gaujelin,” in *Eye of the Beholder*, ed. Alan Chong (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Beacon Press, 2003), 195.

⁷ The exact number of works displayed at the Salon in the sections recorded by Whiteley is 136,346.

juried exhibition. Therefore, it provides information only about artworks selected by the jury. Even though the system that was established in the seventeenth century remained almost unaltered during the eighteenth century, changes occurred afterwards. In this first phase, one jury of *academiciens*, those selected to be members of the Academy, first selected the works to be exhibited while a second one (not necessarily with entirely different members) decided to whom prizes should be bestowed. The French Revolution represented a watershed moment: the jury was abolished in 1791 and any artist was given the right to exhibit works. This extreme change was, however, short-lived, and the jury system reinstated. The composition of the jury as well as the frequency and size of the Salon led to recurrent debates, and as a function of political changes, one or all of these elements were revised. The Salon, and its rules, were thus affected by the environment in which it operated. The sample is therefore biased, but it would be hard to find any systematic form of bias, let alone to determine how the sample was biased at any given moment in time. The data also exhibit a geographical bias, the data series are Paris-centered even though other venues to exhibit artworks obviously existed in other areas of France. Nonetheless, we do our best to summarize some of these changes and biases. Table 1 briefly describes the different rules and balance of power between stakeholders during each regime covered by the Whiteley Index.

The second limitation of the Whiteley Index is that it is a text-based dataset about *images*. The titles of the paintings retrieved from the *livrets* cannot perfectly identify the contents of a painting. Titles may be misleading if they contain a pun or are meant to be part of the artwork, René Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" being a case in point. Our period of interest renders the risk of that specific kind of error extremely limited. Nonetheless, titles may be more evocative than descriptive, and most importantly relying on a title alone does not allow analyzing quality or style.

For example, the title of Degas' portrait of Joséphine Gaujelin, simply *Portrait de Mme. G...* when shown at the Paris Salon, does not capture the exceptional aesthetic detail of the work. Its title does not describe the careful modeling of the subject's rather stern face, with her thin upper lip and gray eyes that look ever so slightly askance from the viewer. A text-based description also misses the visual details that suggest the sitter's occupation—a ballet dancer who is shown here in her dressing room wearing severe all-black street clothes but still has decorative golden grapes in her hair. Nor does the title alone allow to fully take into account fashion in portraits, and this even though the clothes of sitters may have attracted substantial attention at the time the painting was created.⁸ Whiteley's solution for mitigating—if not eliminating—this loss of detail was to create thousands of subject headings that are dizzyingly precise, including categories like “Girls with Poultry,” precise locations of French landscapes to the commune-level, and even specific dog breeds.

Therefore, while an imperfect proxy for paintings, Whiteley's Index provides information about a quantity of paintings that would otherwise be impossible to grasp. Even though the database suffers from a bias due to the jury's selection, it notably avoids any form of ex-post-facto bias. Paintings acquired by or exhibited in museums today may reflect current interests, not the interests of the public when they were painted. As a matter of fact, most paintings in the database are not in public collections and many seem not to have survived the two centuries separating their creation and the present. This is a vast untapped source that, to date, has only been used as a finding aid. Digitizing the Index not only makes it a more easily searchable finding aid but allows it to become an unprecedentedly large source of data about a major historic art exhibition. Whiteley's

⁸ This was, for example, the case of the portrait of Marie-Antoinette by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun *Marie-Antoinette in a chemise dress*, which was considered as indecent when exhibited at the Salon in 1783 (Ingrid E. Mida, *Reading Fashion in Art*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, 9).

Index is, furthermore, only one example of a wide range of text-based art historical sources that were originally created as finding aids and, in a digital age can be viewed as valuable data sources.⁹

Despite the inability of Degas' title to capture the beauty of his work, we believe that in general portraits represent an instance where the use of a title to describe a painting—or in this case to identify the sitter and his or her socioeconomic profile is particularly valuable. Identification can be less ambiguous than in other areas, such as genre or mythological painting. Portraiture is, therefore, an area where one can easily tap the many textual records of historical art exhibitions like the Whiteley Index. In addition to using Whiteley's own identifications of sitters, we were able to add further granularity and classifications to his data by using statistical programs to read the names of sitters and their honorifics.¹⁰ This allowed us to classify them by gender, whether or not they were a political ruler or a hereditary elite, their professions, and the extent to which they were “anonymous” in their title if not their likeness—such as the famous *Mme. X* by American painter John Singer Sargent [fig 3] or the slightly more specific, but not fully identified, *Mme. G...*

Portraits at the Salon: An Art Historical & Statistical Overview

Across the life of the Salon—as early as the 1740s through the 1880s—portraits were criticized. They were habitually acknowledged as a major presence at the exhibition but considered to be of limited artistic merit. Often dismissed as commercial work done for guaranteed commissions, they occupied a low rung of the traditional hierarchy of genres in European art

⁹ For more information about these additional datasets see Diana Seave Greenwald, *Painting by Numbers: Data-Driven Histories of Nineteenth-Century Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 23-51

¹⁰ The specific keywords used to add further analyze to these portrait categorizations are available in the reproduction files that accompany this article.

academies.¹¹ As early as 1747, at the very beginning of our sample, the critic Lafont de Saint-Yenne wrote, “Today, the portrait is the genre of painting that is the most abundant ...and the most mediocre”¹² This sentiment continued into the nineteenth century, with famed Salon commentator Hilaire-Léon Sazerac writing in 1834: “Today one would seek [great art] in vain...it is usurped by...a sad meeting of ridiculous portraits. Big, small, bizarre, insipid, beautiful, ugly, portraits of all kinds, finally of all values and all classes, wonderfully framed, spreading their desperate mediocrity in the sanctuary of the arts”¹³ No one less than Alexandre Dumas piled on twenty-five years later: “The Salon is cluttered with portraits, even bad portraits, and yet the jury refused portraits by the hundreds”¹⁴

This contemporaneous dismissal of portraiture has endured in present-day scholarship. In a recent survey of portraiture, Shearer West writes that portraits’ scholarly neglect is, in part, linked to its reputation as a “mimetic art.”¹⁵ Viewed as a faithful representation of notable person, the portrait becomes a stand-in for that person rather than an independent work of aesthetic value. When the sitter becomes less prominent than he or she once was, their likeness is often relegated to museum basements.¹⁶ Therefore, beyond cherry-picked aesthetically compelling examples or images of still-notable people, portraits are typically overlooked.

Compounding this scholarly oversight, portraits have been consistently ignored or assigned low values on the art market.¹⁷ This low value is not only reflected in prices paid for existing

¹¹ Thomas M. Bayer and John R. Page, *The Development of the Art Market in England: Money As Muse* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 31.

¹² Etienne La Font de Saint-Yenne, *Reflexions Sur Quelques Causes de l'état Présent de La Peinture En France . Avec Un Examen Des Principaux Ouvrages Exposés Au Louvre Le Mois d’Août 1746* (Paris: A La Haye, chez Jean Neaulme, 1747), 23, <https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb36061082v>.

¹³ Hilaire-Léon Sazerac, *Lettres Sur Le Salon de 1834* (Paris: Delaunay, 1834), 16–17.

¹⁴ Alexandre Dumas, *L’art et Les Artistes Contemporains Au Salon de 1859* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1859), 99.

¹⁵ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

¹⁶ Marcia Pointon, *Portrayal and the Search for Identity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 14.

¹⁷ For a description of the markets for portraits see: Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art 1851-1929: Capitalism and Representation*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford University Press, 1999), 163; Luc Renneboog and Christophe

portraits. This observation may be extended to Baroque Rome where sizeable price differentials existed in function of the genre of the paintings, with average prices for portraits well below average prices for landscapes, even though both genres had similar average painting size.¹⁸ Because of their nature, portraits were often commissioned and were therefore less likely to be sold by art dealers. There were for instance very few portraits recorded in the inventory held by Goupil, Boussod & Valadon, a leading nineteenth-century French art dealer that specialized in contemporary works.¹⁹ When we analyze the inventory data from the 1850s to 1900 we find only 5.65 per cent of paintings listed in the inventory are portraits—making them only one-fifth as common in a commercial setting as they were at the Salon.²⁰ Even today, on the secondary market, portraits are rare. Renneboog and Spaenjers (2013) mention the sales of 67,436 portraits in their database that includes 1,088,709 artworks sold, the equivalent of 6.19%.²¹ This low figure may be explained by the specific characteristics of the value of a portrait. As art historian Margaretts Lovell described in an early American setting, a portrait can be particularly devoid of exchange value. It is hugely valuable to a sitter herself and her family both as a likeness and, in the case of oil paintings, as a marker of social status. Yet, because it is a family likeness, the portrait has far less value outside of the family—in fact, beyond the initial commission it has very little commercial value.²² Only portraits by very famous painters or portraits of very famous sitters—

Spaenjers, “Buying Beauty: On Prices and Returns in the Art Market,” *Management Science* 59, no. 1 (2013): 36–53; Kim Oosterlinck, “Art as a Wartime Investment: Conspicuous Consumption and Discretion,” *The Economic Journal* 127, no. 607 (2017): 2665–2701; Bayer and Page, *The Development of the Art Market in England: Money As Muse*. Interestingly, Renneboog and Spaenjers highlight that these low prices *do not* apply to self-portraits.

¹⁸ Federico Etro, Silvia Marchesi, and Laura Pagani. “The labor market in the art sector of Baroque Rome.” *Economic Inquiry* 53, no. 1 (2015): 365–387.

¹⁹ Data and information about Goupil & Cie from Geraldine David, Christian Huemer & Kim Oosterlinck (2020) Art dealers’ inventory strategy: the case of Goupil, Boussod & Valadon from 1860 to 1914, *Business History*, DOI: 10.1080/00076791.2020.1832083. Reproduction files for this analysis are available with this article.

²⁰ This analysis is available in the data and reproduction files accompanying this article

²¹ Luc Renneboog and Christophe Spaenjers, “Buying Beauty: On Prices and Returns in the Art Market,” *Management Science* 59, no. 1 (2013): 36–53.

²² Margaretta Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 133. See, too, Margaretta

such as a monarch—have clear resale value. And these descriptions characterize the limited roster of portraits that appear in the Goupil stock books. This general lack of presence on the secondary market explains, in part, cultural economists’ limited engagement with portraiture; it is simply not in the market-based datasets they typically use. Therefore, the Salon, where portraits could be shown prior to disappearing into family homes, represents an ideal setting to examine this otherwise neglected genre.

Considering this general omission of portraits both from the economic and art historical literature, even the initial quantitative survey and analysis of portraits included in this research note represents a notable contribution. **Figure 4** provides a general overview of the frequency of portraiture shown at the Paris Salon. It shows that portraiture was the most commonly displayed type of artwork throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, representing 27 per cent of paintings on average. This is more than the average amount of history, landscape, or genre painting.²³ Though not always the most frequent genre in a given year, there were moments when portraiture represented as much as fifty percent of works; from roughly 1800 to 1848 portraits this number hovers around forty percent.²⁴ This graph therefore quantitatively confirms Salon critics’ statements that portraits were always numerous at the exhibition.²⁵

Lovell, “Painters and Their Customers: Aspects of Art and Money in Eighteenth-Century America,” in Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (eds.), *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, VA: university of Virginia Press, 1994), 284–306.

²³ For a full transcription of the Whiteley Index that encompasses all genres see <https://github.com/dsg2123/Painting-by-Numbers/blob/main/Data/Whiteley%20Index/Whiteley%20Index%20Complete%20FOR%20PUBLICATION.xlsx>

²⁴ Several other scholars have calculated percentages of different genres including Emmanuel de Waresquiel, “Portrait Du Roi et de Ses Élités Sous La Restauration et La Monarchie de Juillet ... Une Contribution à l’étude Des Représentations Du Pouvoir,” *Versalia. Revue de La Société Des Amis de Versailles*, 2006, 178–94; Andrée Sfeir-Semler, *Die Maler Am Pariser Salon 1791-1880* (Frankfort, New York, and Paris: Campus Verlag, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1992); Gérard Monnier, *L’Art et Ses Institutions En France, de La Révolution à Nos Jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 194. Their estimates roughly accord with ours.

²⁵ E.g. Gabriel-Joseph-Hippolyte Laviron and Bruno Galbacio, *Le Salon de 1833* (Paris: A. Ledoux, 1833), 142. Louis Auvray, *Exposition Des Beaux-Arts: Salon de 1864* (Paris: A. Lévy Fils, 1864), 24; Camille Lemonnier, *Salon de Paris 1870* (Paris: V.A. Morel & Cie., 1870), 46.

A market-based explanation is, of course, a powerful argument for why portraits were so numerous at the Salon but were less present among the inventory held and marketed by an art gallery. Portraits were more likely to be specific commissions. For artists, they therefore represented a secure form of income. They did not have to be produced on speculation, unlike the creation of a genre or landscape painting for the market rather than for a specific patron. (Based on a cursory review of the titles in the Goupil stock books, genre and landscapes abounded.) There are a range of scholars who have described the historical dynamics of artists painting for a market. This includes foundational research in the area of cultural economics, such as Harrison and Cynthia White's analysis of the nineteenth-century French dealer-critic system and John Michael Montias' many contributions on Vermeer and his peers.²⁶ However, portraits are a limited part of their analyses—likely because they were generally not sold on an open market. In general, the more recent literature about art markets continues this oversight of portraiture. However, Federico Etro and several co-authors have examined specific contracts between artists and patrons in early modern Italy. In this sample, they capture some information on portraiture in Baroque Rome and found that prices of primary sales followed the traditional hierarchy of genres, with portraits occupying a lower rung. However, once patrons and artists are controlled for, their analysis reveals that inter-genre price differentials disappear.²⁷ This suggests that the labor market for painters was competitive, and partially explains why some painters specialized in specific genres.

Specializing in portraiture provided regular opportunities to create work that already had an assured customer, rather than painting speculatively for the open market. As the art critic

²⁶ Harrison C. and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases & Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World*, 1993 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); e.g. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

²⁷ Federico Etro, Silvia Marchesi, and Laura Pagani. "The labor market in the art sector of Baroque Rome," *Economic Inquiry* 53, no. 1 (2015): 365-387.

Gustave Planche wrote in 1831: “Never, perhaps, were the portraits more numerous than at this year’s Salon. And really that is conceived without difficulty. It would be unwise, in fact, to undertake vast compositions at random, without having almost assured their destination in advance.”²⁸ With respect to portraits, the Salon was less of a marketplace for works looking for an owner and instead presented an opportunity for artists—and patrons—to show a work of art publicly that would soon disappear into the sitter’s home. Why would artists and sitters be interested in showing these pre-purchased works in a public arena? The next sections start to scrape the surface of answering that question by focusing on two trends in portraiture at the Salon: the increasing prevalence of female sitters and the dynamics of anonymity and pseudo-anonymity in the titling of portraits.

Gender & Anonymity in Portraiture at the Salon

Importantly, figure 4 does not provide only the aggregated numbers of portraits of the Salon, but rather how the quantities of portraits changed over time. The remainder of this article examines dynamic change not only in the number of portraits shown but also in the kinds of portraits displayed. There were radical and interesting changes in the demographics of who is featured in French portraiture from the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth-century. This research only scrapes the surface of possible topics of interest by presenting descriptive graphs related to two themes: changing gender ratios of portrait subjects and prevalence of the anonymous or semi-anonymous titling of portraits, such as Degas’ choice to identify Mme. Gaujelin as only Mme. G. We do not seek to fully explain these phenomena, but rather to highlight them as a way to

²⁸ Gustave Planche, *Salon de 1831* (Paris: Imprimerie et Fonderie Pinard, 1831), 57.

demonstrate the many possible interesting avenues of research opened by this new dataset, particularly related to portraiture.

While examining potential trends in the data, we were surprised to discover that many titles of portraits did *not* fully identify subject—a mix of honorifics, initials, and asterisks combined to make the title of the portrait listed in the *livrets* anonymous or semi-anonymous. Titles like Degas’ provided only a textual hint about the subject’s identity. **Figure 5** shows the number of portraits that had titles in which the sitter was anonymous or semi-anonymous. The rate of anonymity drops towards the end of the *ancien regime*—although the percentage is volatile—and spikes again in the midst of Revolutionary chaos. Then, from the 1790s, it declines slowly. Strikingly, over the whole sample between forty and fifty percent of portraits had an anonymous or pseudo-anonymous title.

What could have been the purpose of this widespread anonymous titling? One goal seems to have been to participate in what Richard Brettell called an “urban game of identifying the subject of exhibited portraits.”²⁹ In short, who could recognize whom? One cannot rule out that the selection of the portraits by the jury was influenced by the status of the sitters, with images of better-known higher-status people more likely to be accepted. The Salon was a space well-known for the mixing of people from different social backgrounds and for strolling to see and be seen. When attending the exhibition, one could demonstrate one’s class or social group with certain dress or behaviors. The ability to identify the sitter for a pseudo-anonymous portrait was, perhaps, another way to create and reinforce social stratification. In Salon criticism, there are hints of this subtle competition to demonstrate being in-the-know. Théophile Gauthier, for example, implied

²⁹ Brettell, *Modern Art 1851-1929: Capitalism and Representation*, 199. Another book that examines the Salon-going public in an earlier period is Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

he knew the sitter for the painting *Mme. I. P.* shown in 1861 when he wrote: “Besides the merit of resemblance, the portrait of Mrs. I. P. has that of being admirably composed.”³⁰ In other cases, the demonstrating recognition was much more explicit: “But it is especially in the *Portrait of Dr. Lucien C*, that one finds the qualities of the conscientious talent of M. Cartellier...we recognized immediately one of the Emperor’s doctors that we had the opportunity to meet at the Tuileries.”³¹

These were portraits—the subjects were *not* intended to be anonymous models and the paintings were supposed to represent their likenesses. According to Simon, the *mondaines*—the socialites of the day—expected the public to recognize their face, since it was supposedly known to everyone.³² Nonetheless, without contextualizing clues provided in the titles. The identities of the sitters were concealed from members of the viewing public who could not recognize the man or woman in the painting by sight. Sitters, however, sometimes seem to have helped viewers recognize them or compare the likeness. A critic writing about the Salon during the July Monarchy described this behavior: “Mr. Goyet is not the only one who parades in the presence of his portrait. Everyone admires the diligence of Mr. Amaury-Duval around his: it is a very innocent way of putting the public in a position to judge the resemblance, and to make him taste this way of interpreting nature.” As **figure 6** shows, Honoré Daumier poked fun at this habit during the Second Empire.

There were other potential reasons for portrait sitters to maintain a level of anonymity at the exhibition. One explanation, proposed by Emmanuel de Waresquiel, is that vain elites wanted to have their portrait painted—and to be shown at the Salon—but social and moral conventions

³⁰ Théophile Gautier, *Abécédaire Du Salon de 1861* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1861), 95, <https://archive.org/details/abcedairedusa00gaut/page/206>.

³¹ Auvray, *Exposition Des Beaux-Arts: Salon de 1864*, 30.

³² Marie Simon, *Fashion in art: The second empire and impressionism*. London: Zwemmer, 1995, 139.

made this desire problematic because of pretensions to modesty.³³ The ability of anonymity to convey modesty seems to have been particularly important for women, who were subject to more restrictive codes of social behavior and public presentation.³⁴ The most famous example of pseudo-anonymity clashing with social rules about the depiction of women in nineteenth-century French art is John Singer Sargent's *Madame X* (1884) [fig 3], which was actually listed as *Madame ***** in the *livret* for that year.³⁵

The portrait of Virginie Avengo Gautreau, which appeared three years after the end of our sample, provoked scandalized critical responses. Commentators characterized Sargent's painting as an immodest image of a sexually provocative woman. While the anonymous title theoretically could have protected Gautreau's identity and officially preserved her modesty, in reality everyone knew exactly who she was. Her mother wrote to a friend, "All Paris mocks my daughter. She is ruined. My people will be forced to defend themselves. She'll die of chagrin."³⁶ Even the most famous anonymous portrait ever shown at the Paris Salon was not, in fact, anonymous.

The episode around *Madame X* is linked to another phenomenon discovered when analyzing data about Salon portraiture: a dramatic increase in the number of women depicted. Most—but not all—Salon portraits, even the semi-anonymous ones, included a gendered title (i.e. Madame or Monsieur, Le Baron or La Baronne, etc.) Therefore, one can categorize portraits by

³³ Waresquiel, "Portrait Du Roi et de Ses Élités Sous La Restauration et La Monarchie de Juillet ... Une Contribution à l'étude Des Représentations Du Pouvoir," 178–94.

³⁴ Jann Matlock, "Seeing Women in the July Monarchy Salon: Rhetorics of Visibility and the Women's Press," *Art Journal* 55, no. 2 (1996): 73–84.

³⁵ Susan Sidlauskas, "Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent's 'Madame X,'" *American Art* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 11.

³⁶ Quoted in Sidlauskas, 29.

gender.³⁷ **Figure 7** plots the proportion of portrait sitters that were identifiably men or women.³⁸ While women were more represented than men in most years from the beginning of the sample, female sitters came to totally dominate the walls of the Salon from the First Empire forward. The gap continued to widen as the nineteenth century progressed.

While a complete analysis of the causes of this increase in the number of women on display is beyond the scope of a research note, we believe there are several possible explanations. First, the increase in the number of women depicted coincided with an increase in female attendance at the Salon.³⁹ The growing bourgeois audience that sought to see itself on the walls of the exhibition was, apparently, both male and female. As one commentator wrote in response to the Salon of 1834, amidst the bourgeois-favoring *enrichissez-vous* culture of the July Monarchy: “The financial aristocracy is happy to sneak after the nobility into the artist’s studio and take its tribute to its own credulous self-admiration.”⁴⁰ This self-admiration—or perhaps the admiration of one’s spouse—encompassed both men and women.

However, we believe there is an additional explanation for why this bourgeois desire to demonstrate one’s wealth and standing may have particularly driven the depiction of women: fashion. There was a symbiotic relationship between female sitters interested in demonstrating their fashionability and painters interested in demonstrating their ability to render women in expressive poses and complicated garments. In contrast to men whose nineteenth-century uniform

³⁷ Group portraits including men and women or assigned the male plural, as is grammatically correct in French for mixed groups, could not be assigned to a specific gender.

³⁸ Note that throughout this article we use “man” and “woman” as a clear binary. This choice is not to deny the fluidity of gender was understood in our present moment. Instead, this study is tethered to the fact that nineteenth-century data conform to a nineteenth-century concept of gender: that there were two genders, and they both reflected biological sex.

³⁹Matlock, “Seeing Women in the July Monarchy Salon: Rhetorics of Visibility and the Women’s Press”; Laurence Brogniez, “Les Femmes Au Salon: Salons de Femmes (1830-1870),” *Les Femmes Parlent d’Art* 1 (2011), <https://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textetimage/index.php?id=77#tocto1n2>.

⁴⁰ Sazerac, *Lettres Sur Le Salon de 1834*, 35–36.

was the ubiquitous black frock coat, women's fashion was varied and changing throughout the century. While many painters asked their female sitters to wear dresses reminiscent of classical antiquity (a choice lamented by Baudelaire), there were also those artists painters who encouraged their sitters to cutting-edge clothing.⁴¹ Detailed accounts of the Salon suggest that fashion was indeed an important element of the exhibition. Consider just one section of Gauthier's long description of the outfit that Princess Maria Clotilde of Savoy, a member of the house of Bonaparte, was wearing in an 1861 portrait by Antoine Auguste Ernest Herbert. "Her Imperial Highness is dressed in a white dress and a blue velvet coat thrown back the dress, pure cloud of gauze and lace, air woven, breathes fabric, envelops it like a steam."⁴² This focus on women's fashion at the Salon represents part of a growing ecosystem around the fashion industry in France.

The increase in the depiction of women in portraits, which really takes off in the 1830s, coincides with the development of Paris as the center of the fashion world.⁴³ Fashion became a major French export and the industry was a significant employer. "By 1847 the garment trade was the predominant employer of Paris workers."⁴⁴ Magazines began to be used to showcase the fashionable toilettes and advertise them around the globe. After 1830, the number of fashion magazines increased dramatically; from then on French fashion plates were regularly reproduced in magazines in the United Kingdom and United States.⁴⁵ The existing literature about the history of fashion has focused on the role of print media, department stores, and international fairs in globalizing French fashion.⁴⁶ However, one may also add Salon painters to this list of

⁴¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Le peintre de la vie moderne*. Collection Litteratura.com available at https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/14785/mod_resource/content/1/BAUDELAIRE_le%20peintre.pdf, 11; Ingrid E. Mida, *Reading Fashion in Art*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, 29

⁴²Gautier, *Abécédaire Du Salon de 1861*, 206–7.

⁴³ Mida, 132.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth L. Block, *Dressing Up: The Women Who Influenced French Fashion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 5.

⁴⁵ Block, 5.

⁴⁶ Block, 2021; Veronique Pouillard, *Paris to New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

disseminators of this growth industry. At the Salon, “a dress [shown in a painting of a woman] which aroused notice earned excellent publicity for the couturier. At that time when advertising was making a timid appearance in the Press, mention by critics was more effective.”⁴⁷ Some painters, such as Claude-Marie Dubufe (1790-1864) and his son Édouard Dubufe (1819-1883), were best-known not for sitters’ likenesses, but rather for focusing on female sitters’ outfits.⁴⁸ As one commentator wrote, “After all, if there is one thing that can console Mr. Dubufe, it is the enthusiasm generated by the French productions of the genre in which he excels. The thumbnails of the *Journal des Modes* go around the world.”⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, the period covered by the Dubufes’ careers—roughly 1833 to 1876—overlap with the marked growth of the depiction of women at the Salon, as shown in figure 7.

The relationship between fashion and art, of course, ran in both directions. Artists were among the consumers of fashion plates and used them to find inspiration. Carolus-Duran and his pupil Sargent—two of best-known portraitists of the latter half of the nineteenth century—attached such an importance to the fashion of their sitters that they sometimes specified which dress they should wear.⁵⁰ One scholar has argued that it was basically a job requirement for all portrait painters to be knowledgeable about fashion.⁵¹ Even the more avant-garde painters who were sometimes excluded from the Salon—like Edouard Manet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir—closely followed the most recent fashions and featured them in their artworks.⁵² The growth in the number of women shown in Salon portraits can, in part, be a reflection of the eagerness of artists to engage

⁴⁷ Simon, 139

⁴⁸ Matlock, “Seeing Women in the July Monarchy Salon: Rhetorics of Visibility and the Women’s Press.”

⁴⁹ Charles Lenormant, *Les Artistes Contemporains, Salon de 1831*, vol. Tome I (Paris: Alexandre Mesnier, 1833), 58–59.

⁵⁰ Block, 7.

⁵¹ Simon, 137

⁵² Simon, 142

with the rapidly changing and inspirational fashions produced by major couturiers like Charles Worth.

Finally, an important consequence of the increased importance of the fashion industry and its growing visibility in the media is that “high-class fashion were made known to all, turning fashion into one of the most visible signifiers of class and gender inequalities.”⁵³ Salon portraits, traditional markers of class, therefore also became vehicles in which sitters could further demonstrate their taste and social standing with strategic choices of dress. Virginie Gautreau and her family agreed to Sargent’s request to complete a portrait of her because, as Susan Sidlaukis wrote in her description of the *Madame X* episode, “Madame Avegno [Virginie’s mother] believed that Sargent’s keen interest in her daughter would cement her ascendancy into the pantheon of French style.”⁵⁴ In general, portraits were used as a signal that patrons belonged to a specific social class. The choice of oil painting—rather than the new medium of photography—was already a clear signal of a sitter’s wealth.⁵⁵ Fashion could further distinguish a sitter by showing their good taste.⁵⁶

Figure 8 further illuminates how the demand for fashionable female portraiture overlapped with social expectation. It indicates there was apparently greater tension for female sitters between a desire to be depicted and a need to respect social propriety. Throughout the entire sample women are consistently given an anonymous title more frequently than their male counterparts. And, as the nineteenth century progressed, the anonymity gap between men and women grew. Images of female sitters shown at the Salon had to balance the desire of women to display themselves, their beauty, and their taste in fashion while not broaching the strict standards of propriety applied to

⁵³ Pouillard, 12.

⁵⁴ Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s ‘Madame X,’” 15.

⁵⁵ Simon, 137

⁵⁶ Mida, 100;

women in nineteenth-century Europe. Anonymous titling may have been one way of navigating this careful balancing act. Though an anonymous title was only thin cover for one's identity, it may have provided a social fig leaf that allowed women to be (respectably) shown and seen in a public forum. Although, as the experience of *Madame X* indicates, this fig leaf was of limited utility when scandal struck a sitter and her depiction.

Conclusion

This research note has introduced a new valuable and publicly available dataset based on the Whiteley Index. In doing so, it presents an example of a new kind of text-based source of data about art history that captures large amounts of information about paintings that have otherwise disappeared from the historical record. Analyzing this dataset demonstrates that portraits, which have traditionally suffered from scholarly neglect but, perhaps unexpectedly, were also the most common kind of painting displayed at the Paris Salon. Apart from providing this new insight about the prevalence of a neglected genre this essay has shown there are many fascinating potential research questions to be asked and addressed about portraits and their changing demographics and titling conventions. However, these sample case studies about portraiture are just the beginning of the many possible topics to be investigated with the help of the Whiteley Index.

Figures

G., Mme.: 1799-76, 155; 1802-186; 1812-719, 725; 1814-827, 952; 1817-688; 1822-646; 1824-894; 1831-164, 1184, 1730; 1833-33, 360, 394, 555, 678, 1906, 2931, 3019, 3201; 1835-1272, 1639, 1681; 1836-299, 525, 596, 743, 859; 1837-156, 602, 1546; 1838-542, 951, 952, 1642; 1839-682, 1301; 1840-84, 479, 1198; 1841-14, 862, 865, 1654; 1842-492, 672, 832, 925, 1692, 1749, 1799; 1843-481, 920; 1844-105, 236, 449, 901,

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903, 1227, 1587; 1845-632, 843, 1126; 1846-132, 1097, 1911, 1930, 1964, 1967; 1847-377, 896, 1277, 1670; 1848-761, 1749, 1847, 1904, 1957, 1992, 2035, 3072, 3382, 3413, 3803, 4023, 4380, 4419, 4462; 1849-533, 654, 811, 882, 918, 1147; 1850-1199, 1208, 2961, 3145; 1852-210, 414, 428, 568, 720; 1853-96, 1124; 1855-3015, 3369, 3398, 3558, 3795; 1857-77, 169, 275, 407, 1820, 2019; 1859-840, 1213, 1287, 1728, 2393, 2850, 2967; 1861-180, 1214, 2015, 2157, 2542; 1863-767, 1420, 2080, 2083, 2085, 2134; 1863R-603; 1864-773, 1603; 1865-162, 2416, 2417, 2073; 1866-652, 2265, 2366, 2500; 1867-638, 1690; 1868-2114; 2942, 3170; 1869-84, 661, 1010, 1248, 2134, 2455, 3197; 1870-890, 1436, 2370, 2378, 2955, 3041, 3320, 3633, 4193; 1873-619; 1874-2196, 2287; 1875-321, 368, 759, 1126, 1993, 2352; 1876-19, 633, 2704, 2951; 1877-1134, 2151; 1878-998, 1008, 1084, 1122, 1594, 3139, 3354, 3780; 1879-227, 2102, 2308, 3001, 3502, 3733, 3970, 4519; 1880-1843, 3439, 3451, 3658, 4636, 4772, 5024, 5686, 5968, 6010; 1881-1199, 2184, 2983, 2996.

G., Mme. de: 1822-110, 391; 1824-1412; 1837-82; 1840-449; 1841-60; 1845-1345; 1846-473; 1847-656; 1848-3329; 1852-1047; 1857-914; 1859-939, 1019; 1861-811, 1192, 2541; 1869-50; 1870-240; 1879-3857, 4694; 1880-1751, 3210; 1881-1829.

Figure 1. Scan of pages 613 – 614 from Jon Whiteley, *Subject Index to Paintings Exhibited at the Paris Salon, 1673–1881* (1993). The numbers shown refer to the year of the exhibition and number assigned to the painting. If we look at the first set of numbers that appear after the subject tag “G., Mme.” we can understand this system. “1799-76” refers to painting number 76 shown in the Salon of 1799. The relevant numbers for *Madame Gaujelin* are circled. We see that Degas’ canvas was the second of two “Mme. G.” paintings shown in the Salon of 1869. It was number 661, while there was also another “Mme. G” earlier in the *livret*, specifically number 84. In fact, there were a total of seven paintings shown with the title Mme. G that year. Years are separated by semi-colons. Therefore, we know the final Mme G. in the 1869 Salon was number 3197.

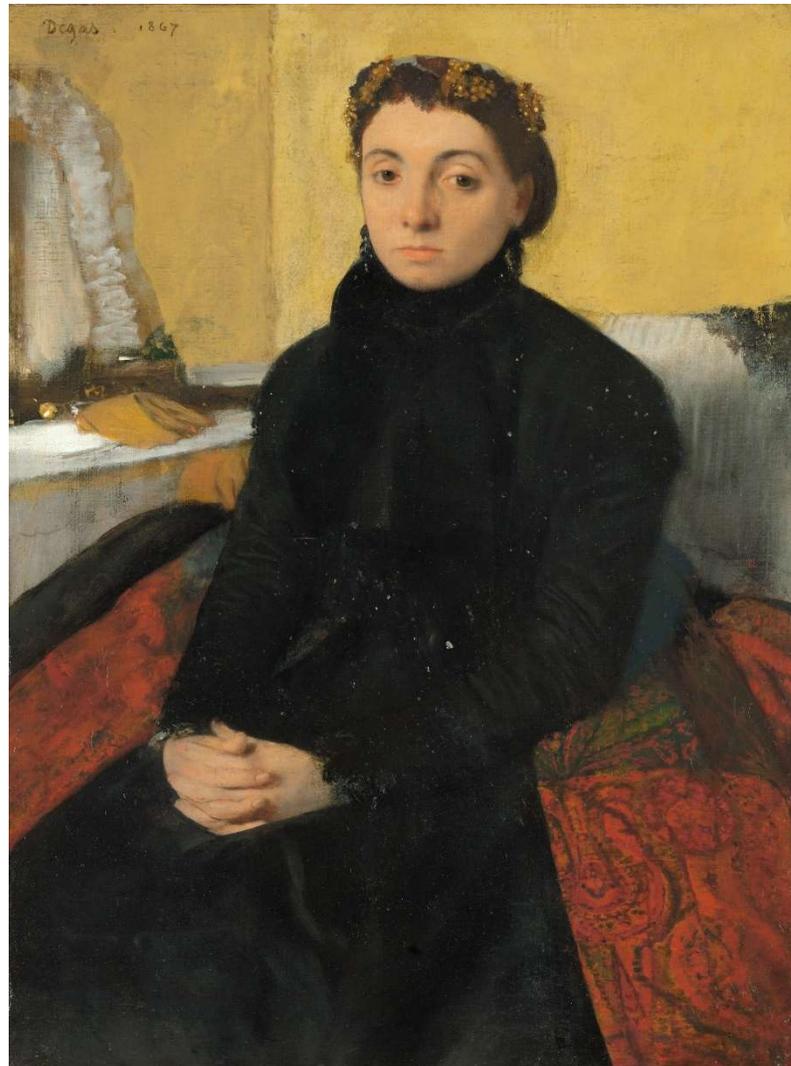


Figure 2. Edgar Degas, *Joséphine Gaujelin*, 1867, oil on canvas, 61.2 x 45.7 cm, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. Displayed at the Paris Salon in 1869 as “Mme. G,” number 661.

Table 1. French Political Regimes and Their Salon Policies

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Regime</i>	<i>Ruler(s)</i>	<i>Number of Salons</i>	<i>Jury Rules & Government Art Policy</i>
~15th century–1789	Ancien Régime	Multiple, including Louis XIV, Louis XV, Louis XVI	37	The Salon began as an irregular show for the members of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. It became an annual exhibition in 1737, with the jury system for selecting works to be shown instituted in 1748. Even after the establishment of the jury, only members of the Academy could exhibit.
1790–1792	French Revolution	-	1	Jury was abolished and Revolutionary Salon made open to all artists, amateur and professional, all nationalities.
1792–1804	First French Republic	National Convention, Directory, Consulate (Napoleon)	8	In order to control the quality of work shown, the jury was reestablished. In 1798, the jury was composed of painters, sculptors, and architects nominated by the government.
1804–1814 (briefly 1815)	First Empire	Napoleon I	6	In 1808, the national director of museums—Vivant Denon—reconfigured the jury to include both artists and amateurs selected by the government.
1815–1830	Constitutional Bourbon Restoration	King Louis XVIII (1814–1824) & Charles X (1824–1830)	5	Louis XVIII’s government adopted Denon’s approach to appointing the jury, placing it under the control of the director of museums. A new appointed committee known as the “Conseil honoraire des Musées royaux” also served as Salon jury, which was roughly half high-ranking arts administration officials and half artists, most of whom were <i>académiciens</i> .
1830–1848	Constitutional Orléanist Monarchy (July Monarchy)	King Louis-Philippe	17	Academics sat on the jury, and past prizewinners received privileged admission. However, the government also worked to provide support to independent artists.
1848–1852	Second Republic	Constitutional Assembly, President Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte	2	Jury abolished for first Salon; jury reestablished but elected by artists for remaining exhibitions.
1852–1870	Second Empire	Emperor Napoleon III (Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte)	14*	For first Salon, jury partially elected and partially appointed; for later Salons jury entirely appointed or mostly appointed; traditional exception that past prizewinners were automatically accepted was abolished.
1870–1940	Third Republic	Parliamentary Republic	11	Jury partially appointed by the government, partially elected by academics and past prizewinners; traditional exception for past prizewinners reestablished.

*15 including the Salon de Refusés; one of these Salons was replaced by Exposition Universelle (1855).

Reproduced from Diana Seave Greenwald, *Painting by Numbers: Data-Driven Histories of Nineteenth-Century Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). Based on Patricia Mainardi, “Political Regimes, 1789–1870,” in *The End of the Salon: Art and the State in the Early Third Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 34; *Catalogues of the Paris Salon, 1673 to 1881*, 60 vols., ed. H. W. Janson (New York: Garland, 1977); Albert Boime, “The Second Empire’s Official Realism,” in *The European Realist Tradition*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 31–123; Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971); Pierre Vaisse, “Reflections sur la fin du Salon officiel,” in *Ce Salon à quoi tout se ramène: Le Salon de peinture et de sculpture, 1791–1890*, ed. James Kearns and Pierre Vaisse (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 117–38; Harriet Griffiths, “The Jury of the Paris Fine Arts Salon, 1831–1852” (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2013).



Figure 3. John Singer Sargent, *Madame X*, 1884, oil on canvas, 208.6 x 109.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

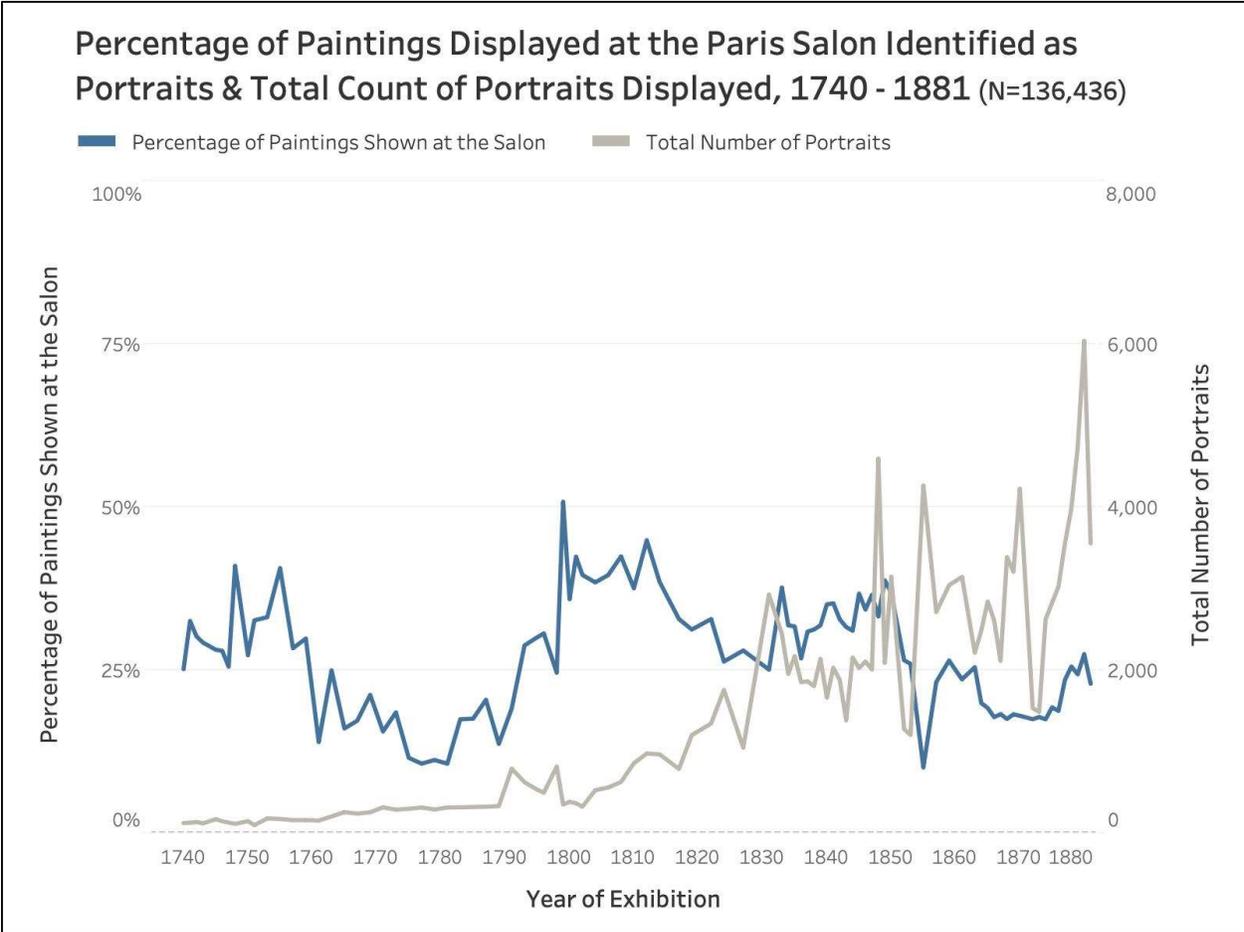


Figure 4. Percentage of Paintings Displayed at the Paris Salon Identified as Portraits and Total Count of Portraits, 1740 – 1881

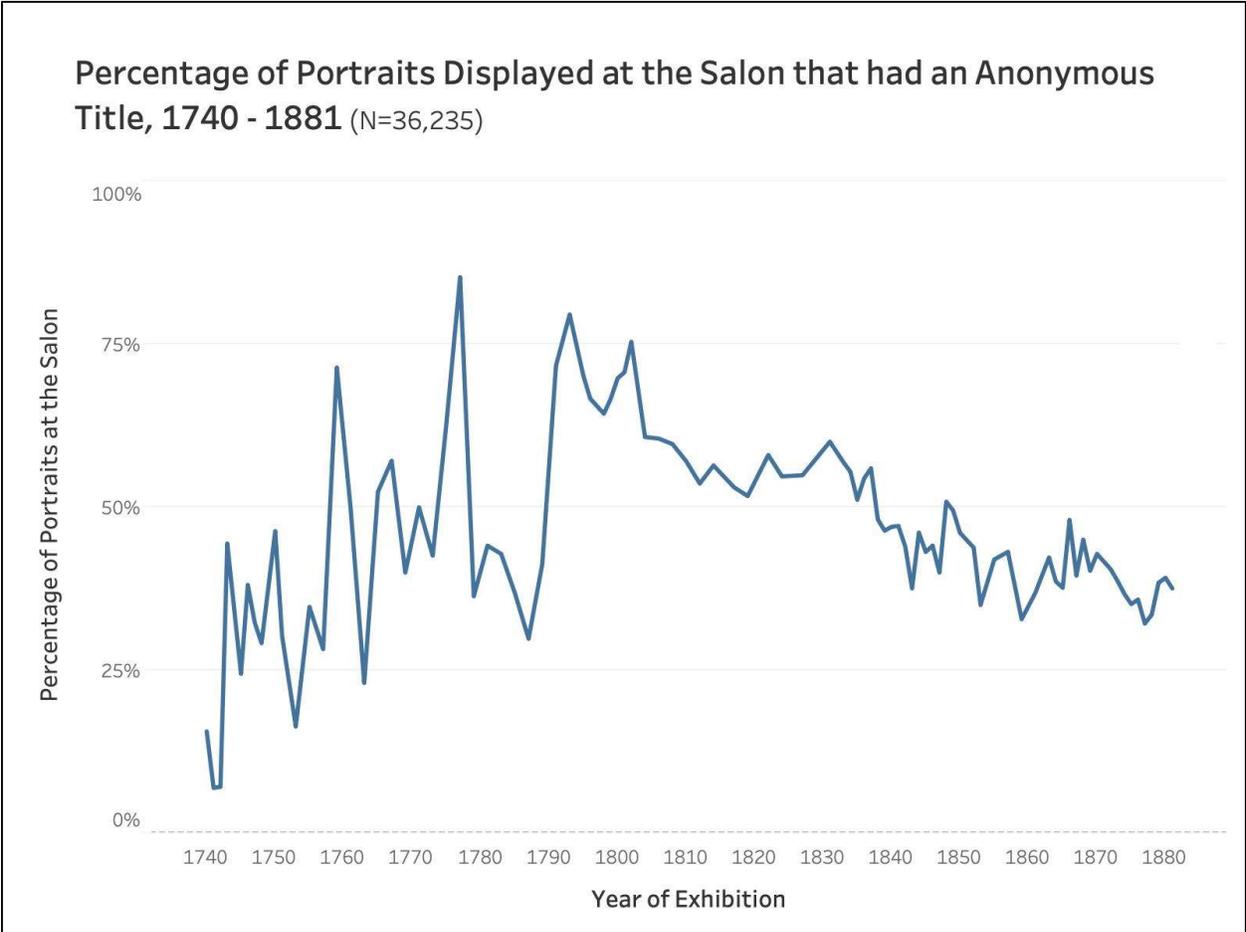


Figure 5. Percentage of Portraits Displayed at the Salon that had an Anonymous Title, 1740 – 1881



Figure 6. Honoré Daumier, *It is very flattering to have one's portrait at the exhibition*, lithograph, published in *Le Charivari*, August 31, 1857
URL: <http://bir.brandeis.edu/handle/10192/3385>

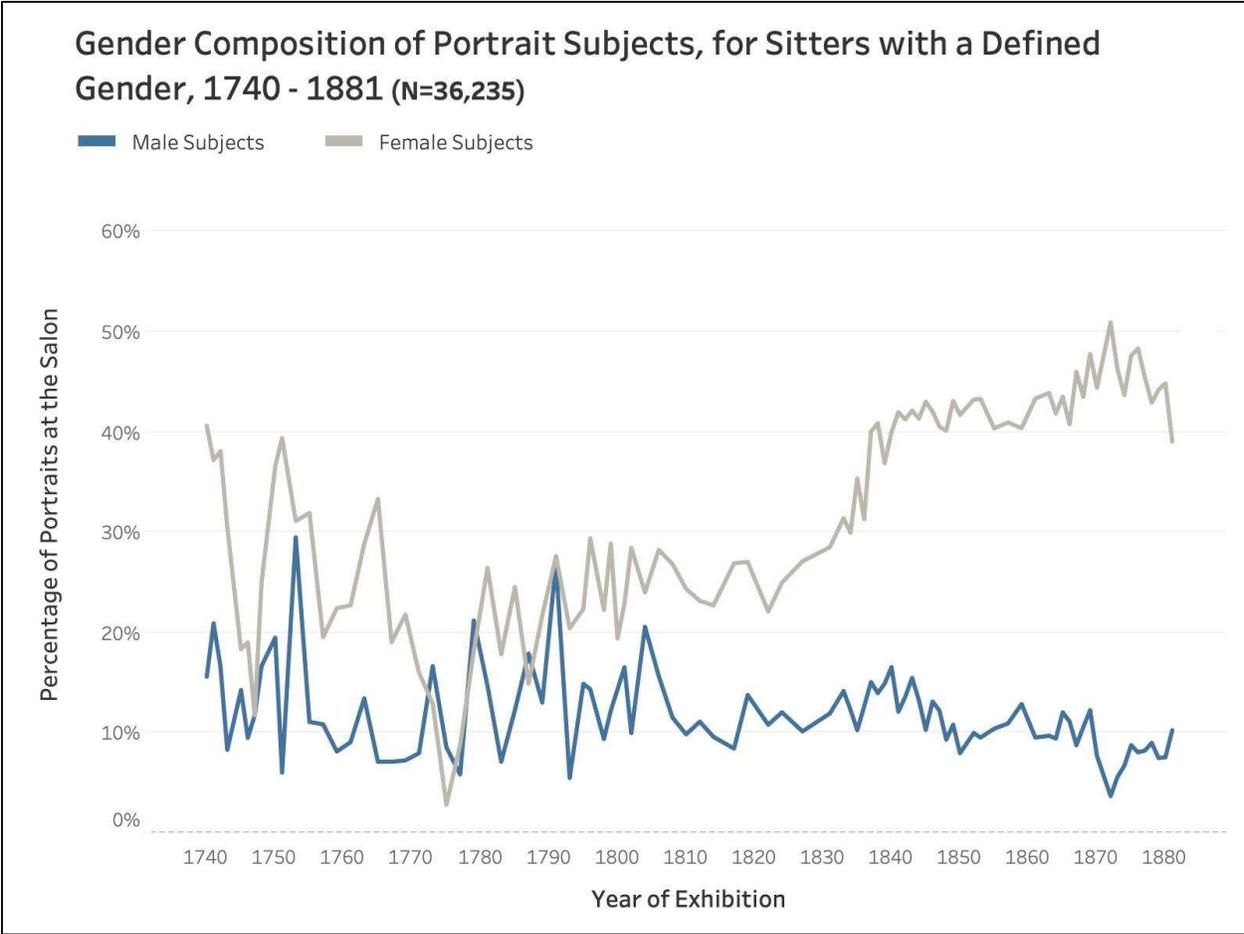


Figure 7. Gender Composition of Portrait Subjects for Sitters with an Identifiable Gender, 1740 – 1881 (N = 36,235)

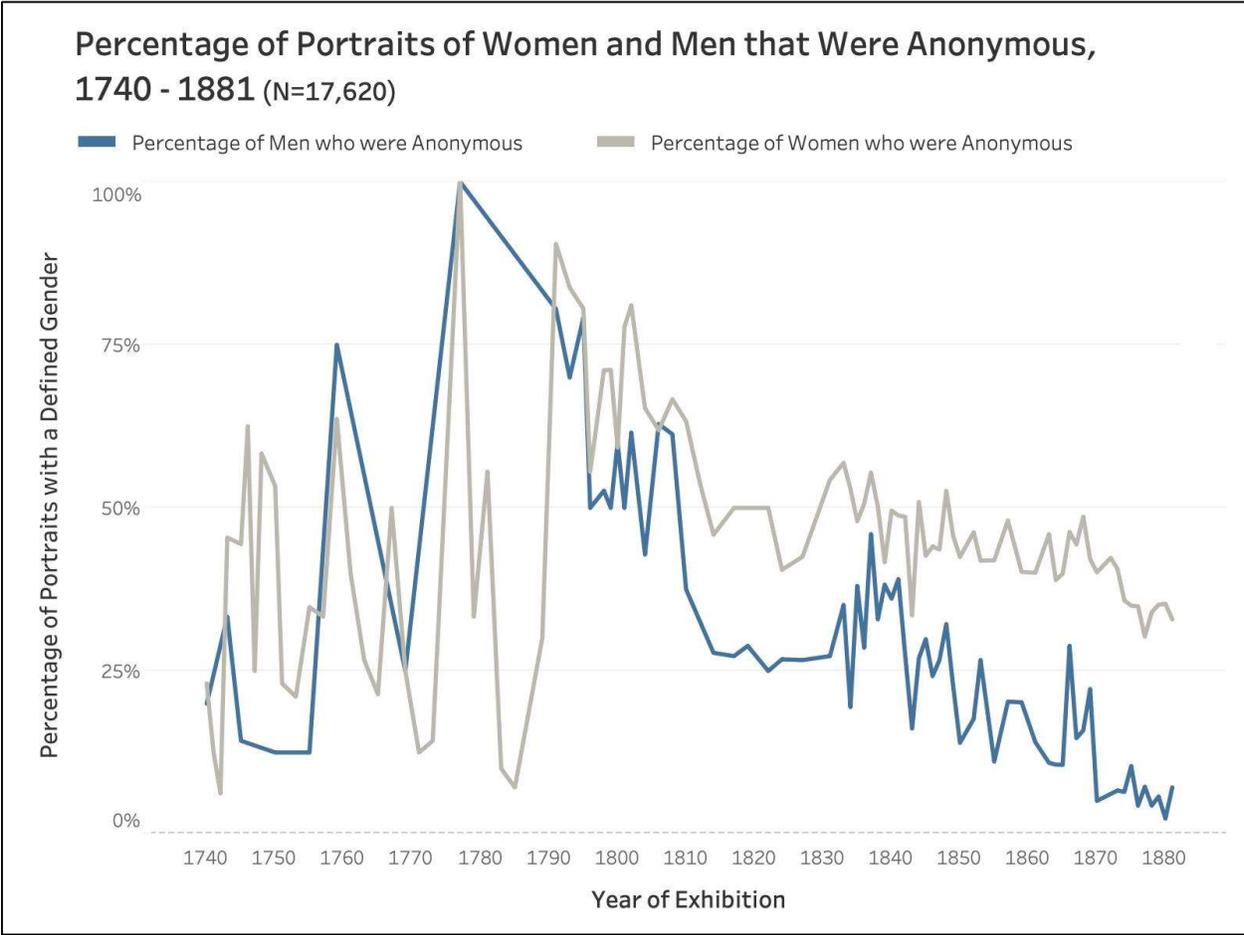


Figure 8. Percentage of Portraits of Women and Men that Were Anonymous, 1740 - 1881 (N=17,620). Note that years with no observations eliminated from visualization, but included in data.