

# Impressionism and the *Salons Juifs*: The Ephrussi Family and Jewish Patronage Networks in 1880s Paris

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In volume three of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the novel's narrator visits the most prestigious aristocratic salon hostess in Paris, the Duchess de Guermantes. As the Duchess serves her guest more asparagus, she turns her attention to a painting by the artist Elstir, a character inspired by Gustave Moreau, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, and others. Always the gracious hostess, the Duchess mentions the painting because she has noticed the narrator admiring it, though the reader is informed: "As a matter of fact, she hated Elstir's work."<sup>1</sup> The narrator jumps at the opportunity to discuss modern art with his noble hosts:

I asked Monsieur de Guermantes if he knew the name of the gentleman in the top hat who figured in the picture of the crowd... "Good Lord, yes," he replied, "I know it's a fellow who is quite well-known and no fool either in his own line, but I have no head for names... Swann would be able to tell you, it was he who made Madame de Guermantes buy all that stuff... Between ourselves, I believe he's landed us with a bunch of junk. What I can tell you is that the gentleman you mean has been a sort of Maecenas to Elstir. He gave him a start and has often helped him out of tight places by ordering pictures from him. As a compliment to this man—if you can call that sort of thing a compliment—he has painted him standing among that crowd... He may be a big gun in his own way but he is evidently not aware of the proper time and place for a top hat. With that thing on his head, among all those bare-headed girls, he looks like a little country lawyer on the razzle-dazzle."<sup>2</sup>

The painting that the narrator and the Duke are discussing is identifiable as Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, and the overdressed figure is Renoir's friend and patron Charles Ephrussi, the art historian, collector, and owner of the distinguished periodical, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (Figure

1). The Duke continues:

I know of course that [Elstir's paintings] are merely sketches, still, I don't feel that he puts enough work into them. Swann had the nerve to try and make us buy a *Bundle of Asparagus*. In fact it was in the house for several days. There was nothing else in the picture, just a bundle of asparagus exactly like the ones you're eating now. But I must say I declined to swallow Monsieur Elstir's asparagus. He asked three hundred francs for them. Three hundred francs for a bundle of asparagus! A louis, that's as much as they're worth, even early in the season.<sup>3</sup>

Again, the painting in question is based on a real work, *Bundle of Asparagus* by Manet (Figure 2).

In this scene Elstir's paintings function as gauges of aesthetic sensitivity, revealing the Guermantes' inability to comprehend modern art. In *In Search of Lost Time* Proust chronicles a fictionalized Belle Époque Paris with a keen eye for subtle distinctions in the class, taste, intelligence, and affiliation of his characters. Thus, it is important to determine precisely which social group the author is contrasting with the aristocracy in terms of its relationship with modern art. The answer lies in Proust's multiple allusions to the historical figure Charles Ephrussi. In his assessment of *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, the Duke de Guermantes is dismissive of this patron, with his inappropriate attire and poor taste in art. The fictional aristocrat's distaste for the art historian and collector is reiterated if the reader is aware that Ephrussi commissioned *Bundle of Asparagus* from Manet in 1880. To this day, it is rare to find a discussion of this painting that does not include the "delightful story" of its purchase.<sup>4</sup> Moved by friendship for the ailing artist, Ephrussi sent Manet 200 francs more than the quoted price for the still life. To thank him, Manet famously sent a painting of a single asparagus with the note: "There was one missing from your bunch" (Figure 3).

In the novel both *Luncheon of the Boating Party* and *Bunch of Asparagus* are symbolic of the personal relationship shared by Charles Ephrussi and the modern artists of the

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 3:577-78.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Manet's *L'Asperge*," Musée d'Orsay, accessed 14 December 2011, [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire\\_id/lasperge-18315.html?no\\_cache=1](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/lasperge-18315.html?no_cache=1).

late 1870s and early 1880s. Proust was familiar with these relationships because Ephrussi was his friend and mentor on whom he partly based the character of Swann, an art historian, man about town, and member of the bourgeois intelligentsia. As the subject, patron, and promoter of Impressionism, Ephrussi, as well as the narrator and Swann, are the representatives of advanced taste and modernist sensibility in Proust's novel. Early twentieth-century audiences would have immediately recognized the connection between Proust (who is generally assumed to be the narrator), Swann, and Ephrussi. They were all (at least partly) Jewish. In fact, throughout *In Search of Lost Time*, modern art is continually linked with Jewishness and the *salons juifs*, or Jewish high society salons.

Surprisingly, there has been little exploration of the real historical connection between Jewish high society and Impressionism in the 1870s and 1880s, despite the fact that a disproportionately large number of Impressionism's early patrons were Jewish. This paper will map the Jewish patronage network associated with the Ephrussi family to reveal the interconnectedness of Jewish high society in Paris and to argue that in many cases Impressionism can be understood as the visual language of the patronage network of the *salons juifs*. For Jewish high society, Impressionism was a rallying point, a marker of identity that preserved and refashioned a distinct Jewish sphere. The exchange of Impressionist pictures cultivated and consolidated the Jewish community of Paris, creating a circuit of aesthetic relationships that mirrored real social relations. This paper explores how Impressionism visually articulated these relationships, and how the interpretation of Impressionism reflected the influence of its Jewish patrons, particularly Charles Ephrussi who shaped the ideas of later critics including Jules Laforgue. Impressionism and the *salons juifs* shared many stylistic characteristics, and as a result they attracted similar criticisms during the fin de siècle.

In the high society Parisian patronage networks of the Belle Époque, women acted as nodal points around which communal identities were formed and reinforced. The Jewish patronage network was essentially a social network that gathered in salons where women fostered connections. They introduced artists to patrons, sympathetic critics, and potentially inspiring musicians, writers, actors, and socialites. Thus, the map of this network originated not with Charles, but with his sister-in-law, Fanny Ephrussi. Born in Austria, Fanny married into the wealthy Ephrussi banking family of Paris in 1876 and quickly established a salon. She was especially welcoming to artists, writers, collectors, and Jewish high society. Through her letters to Charles Deudon, an

important early collector of the Impressionists, one learns that Fanny was the first of the Ephrussi family to appreciate Impressionism, which she introduced to Charles in the late 1870s.<sup>5</sup> At the time, Charles Ephrussi was already an accomplished art historian specializing in the work of Dürer. His conversion to the new style surprised many, including Manet who had once warned their mutual friend, Théodore Duret: "Leave the children to their mother and Ephrussi to [the stylish academic painter, Léon] Bonnat" (Figure 4).<sup>6</sup> Encouraged by Fanny, Charles began to collect Impressionist paintings and published some of the earliest positive reviews of the style in the respected *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1878, 1880, and 1881.

The network of influential people connected to Fanny and Charles Ephrussi was so wide, it would be impossible to map here. The examples of Charles Ephrussi's cousins, the Bernsteins, who introduced Impressionism to Germany, will have to suffice to demonstrate the importance of personal relationships to the success of Impressionism. In 1882 Charles sent his cousins Carl and Félicie Bernstein of Berlin twelve Impressionist paintings which they displayed in their home for artists, curators, critics, and their *mondain* friends to examine (Figure 5). A year later, with the support of Charles and the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, they staged the first ever Impressionist exhibition in the country at Berlin's Gurlitt gallery. This exhibition and the Bernstein's salon have been credited with inspiring not only German Impressionists such as Max Liebermann but also the Berlin Secession of 1898.<sup>7</sup>

The Impressionist paintings that circulated among the *salons juifs* created a communal identity. Like-minded people gathered at the salons of Fanny Ephrussi, Félicie Bernstein, and their circles in Paris and Berlin, where they admired and discussed the newest Impressionist paintings and met the artists. The names of the Ephrussis, their friends, and family appeared together repeatedly in exhibition catalogues and press coverage of the art world, making Impressionism a kind of marker of Jewish identity in the public imagination. Often works were not sold, but passed from one family member to another or among friends. For example, Charles and Fanny's nephew Théodore Reinach was the recipient not only of the directorship of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* after Charles's death, but also his aunt and uncle's modern paintings, including Degas's *General Mellinet and Chief Rabbi Astruc*, a portrait of the father of Charles's friend Gabriel Astruc.

The historians of Jewish consumer culture Gideon Reuveni and Nils Roemer have suggested that Stuart Hall would argue that Jewish patronage of Impressionism acted as a form of cultural resistance to the mainstream of high society

<sup>5</sup> "Correspondance de Charles Deudon avec Fanny Ephrussi," accessed 15 December 2011, <http://deudon.charles.free.fr/>.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Distel, *Impressionism: The First Collectors*, trans. Barbara Perroud Benson (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1990), 161.

<sup>7</sup> Emily D. Bilski and Emily Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons: The*

*Power of Conversation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 84; Gideon Reuveni and Nils Roemer, eds., *Longing, Belong, and the Making of Jewish Consumer Culture* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 7; and Jewish Women's Archive, "Félicie Bernstein," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, accessed 14 December 2011, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/bernstein-felicie>.

taste.<sup>8</sup> For the Bernsteins in Berlin, this was certainly the case. Impressionism set them apart from German high society, characterizing them as cosmopolitan and progressive.<sup>9</sup> It has also been argued that the patronage of modernism brought distinction to members of the Jewish community. For the Ephrussi family, Impressionism was a tool of assimilation into the upper echelons of French high society. In 1886, the same year as Edouard Drumont's book *La France Juive* brought anti-Semitism to the masses, the disapproving author of an article entitled "Jews in Paris" reported:

Then, through the loophole of art, one of these energetic Israelites (Charles Ephrussi) penetrated the salon of an ex-imperial highness (the renowned Princess Mathilde). He made room for his uncles and aunts and cousins, who gradually introduced their friends and their friends' friends, until at last the Wednesday receptions of the amiable hostess...have come to be in a large degree receptions of the descendants of the tribes.<sup>10</sup>

Naturally, Impressionist artists responded to the support of their Jewish patrons. Philip Nord has shown that Impressionism abounds in Jewish subject matter, particularly in portraits and genre paintings.<sup>11</sup> Through these works familial and friendship ties between Jewish patrons and the Impressionist artists become visible. A short demonstration of this point will suffice to reveal Impressionism's literal articulation of the Ephrussi patronage network. Fanny Ephrussi's friend and neighbor, the salon hostess Countess Louise Cahen d'Anvers commissioned two portraits of her daughters from Renoir in 1880 and 1881 on the advice of Charles Ephrussi, with whom she was having an affair (Figures 6 and 7). Louise and the Ephrussis frequented the homes of wealthy Jewish families in the newly developed Monceau district of Paris, including those of Henri Cernsuchi and Moïse de Camondo, who later married the subject of Renoir's 1880 portrait, Irène Cahen d'Anvers. Both of these wealthy art *amateurs* bequeathed their collections and mansions to the French state as museums of (respectively) Asian and eighteenth-century art. Moïse's brother, Isaac de Camondo was another close friend and collaborator of the Ephrussi family. He left sixty-four important Impressionist paintings to the Louvre in the

early twentieth century, including works from his celebrated "Degas room." Louise's husband introduced his brother, the composer Albert Cahen d'Anvers, to Renoir whose portrait the artist painted at the home of their mutual friend, the collector Paul Bérard (Figure 8).<sup>12</sup> Renoir also painted Charles's aunt and her daughter-in-law, Thérèse and Delphine Fould. Another Impressionist collector, the painter Gustave Caillebotte, also lived in the Monceau district and associated with the Ephrussi circle. In Jean Béraud's painting of a *soirée* at the Caillebotte *hôtel particulier*, Louise Cahen d'Anvers is depicted among the guests (Figure 9).

Beyond acting as a visual record of Jewish patronage, Impressionism also shared stylistic characteristics with the *salons juifs*. In many ways, Impressionism reflected the values of Jewish salons, which were devoted not only to visual art, but to the dying art of polite conversation.<sup>13</sup> In the salon, wittiness, artificiality, and femininity were valued above the masculine virtues of directness and concision. Salon conversation was leisurely and circular, not pointed or focused. Beauty trumped functionality, and the fleetingness of fashion set the pace for worldly banter. At Fanny Ephrussi's, there was far less discussion of politics or business than of couture gowns, interior decoration, and exhibition openings. Her letters reveal the jovial and airy tone in which she held forth on the latest books, paintings, articles, plays, concerts, and gossip.<sup>14</sup> She and her friends were extremely well read and well informed, as well as multilingual and well travelled. Though modern in artistic taste, the *salons juifs* were fundamentally out of step with the developing mass culture and society of the late nineteenth century. No doubt the Ephrussi circle recognized similar values in Impressionist paintings. This was certainly true in the case of Charles Ephrussi, whom Edmond de Goncourt criticized for his ubiquity in the salons of Paris.<sup>15</sup>

In 1880, the same year that Charles became obsessed with creating the perfect index for his catalogue raisonné of Dürer's drawings, he was uncharacteristically poetic about his new favorite painter, Berthe Morisot. Perhaps he was referring to one of the works in his own collection, which included *On the Lawn* and *Winter*, when he wrote in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*:

Berthe Morisot is very French in her distinction, elegance, gaiety and nonchalance. She loves painting that is joyous and lively;

<sup>8</sup> Reuvani and Roemer, *Jewish Consumer Culture*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Elana Shapira, "Jewish Identity, Mass Consumption, and Modern Design," in *Longing, Belonging, and the Making of Jewish Consumer Culture*, ed. Gideon Reuvani and Nils Roemer (Boston: Brill, 2010), 99.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Child, "Society in Paris," *The Fortnightly Review* 39 (1886): 486.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Nord, *Impressionists and Politics: Art and Democracy in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2000), 59.

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Adler, "Renoir's Portrait of Albert Cahen d'Anvers," *The J.*

*Paul Getty Museum Journal* 23 (1995): 31-40.

<sup>13</sup> See Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons* on the importance of upholding the French tradition of polite conversation in the *salons juifs*.

<sup>14</sup> Correspondance de Charles Deudon avec Fanny Ephrussi," accessed 15 December 2011, <http://deudon.charles.free.fr/>.

<sup>15</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Journal, Mémoires de la Vie Littéraire* tome 6 (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1906), 11 June 1881. Goncourt accused Ephrussi of "attending six or seven *soirées* every night in order to become the Director of Beaux-Arts."

she grinds flower petals onto her palette, in order to spread them later on her canvas with airy, witty touches, thrown down a little haphazardly. These harmonize, blend, and finish by producing something vital, fine, and charming... this fugitive lightness, this likeable vivacity, sparkling and frivolous recalls Fragonard.<sup>16</sup>

Like the polite conversation of the salons he frequented, Charles appreciated Morisot as an elegant throw-back to the essential Frenchness of the eighteenth century. He was similarly enchanted with the work of Degas who understood Paris from a man's perspective. Charles owned a dance scene by the artist in which, he said, "the artificial atmosphere of the theater had never been better captured."<sup>17</sup> Ephrussi, who financed Degas's first subscription and backstage pass to the opera in 1883, was the expert on such matters as well as on horseracing.<sup>18</sup> Charles accompanied his uncles Maurice and Michel and their prize thoroughbreds to Longchamps many times and owned two paintings of the racecourse by Degas, as well as one by Manet.<sup>19</sup>

Tellingly, Ephrussi was not so taken with what he called the "miserabilism" of Pissarro or the art of Raffaelli who specialized in landscapes of the industrial outskirts of Paris. The only Pissarro works that Ephrussi owned were decorative painted fans, which were popular among society women. In response to the fifth Impressionist exhibition of 1880, where Pissarro showed *The Wool Carder* among other paintings, Ephrussi wrote:

Monsieur Pissarro is far from the communicative gaiety (of Morisot, Cassatt, and Degas). It is painful for him to paint in lively tones; he makes the spring and flowers sad and the air heavy. His facture is thick, cottony, and tormented, and his figures are melancholic...he recalls Millet, but in blue.<sup>20</sup>

As for Raffaelli, Ephrussi lamented that his work's mediocrity became more apparent in the company of the true Impressionists.

Ephrussi's personal relationship with the art of the Impressionists inspired not only his own criticism of the style, but also that of a younger generation of writers. In 1880, Charles bought a portrait by Degas of Edmond Duranty, the

early defender of Impressionism. No doubt, Ephrussi was expressing his debt as a critic to Duranty's interpretation of the style. Norma Broude has credited Duranty with spearheading a strain of Impressionist criticism in 1876 that linked the expressiveness of the picture to the artists' standard of truth to optical reality and conformity to the laws of science.<sup>21</sup> In his reviews of the Impressionist exhibitions beginning in 1878, Ephrussi followed in Duranty's footsteps by defending the truth of Impressionist vision to the operations of the human eye. He wrote, approvingly:

(Impressionism) has not learned its optical catechism, it disdains pictorial rules and regulations, it renders what it sees as it sees it, spontaneously, well or badly, uncompromisingly, without comment...<sup>22</sup>

Though familiar today, such an interpretation was unusual in 1878 and directly linked Ephrussi to Duranty. Ephrussi then passed this interpretation of the style to his protégé, the Symbolist poet Jules Laforgue, who worked as his assistant for a short time in 1880.<sup>23</sup> Before meeting Ephrussi, Laforgue was influenced mainly by Huysmans, who preferred the darker subject matter of Pissarro and Raffaelli to the sparkling landscapes and genre scenes of the other Impressionists. Ephrussi changed the course of Laforgue's Impressionist criticism when he introduced him to his cousins, the Bernsteins. Their 1883 Gurlitt Gallery exhibition inspired the young poet to write an important essay entitled "The Physiological Origins of Impressionism."<sup>24</sup> Laforgue never forgot the experience of being surrounded by Charles's collection of Impressionist paintings. He spoke of these works numerous times in letters and his essay, and was more than likely making a winking reference to Ephrussi's *Two Sisters on a Terrace* by Renoir when he spoke of Impressionism as a style in which the spectator and spectacle are knitted together (Figure 10).

Because Impressionism and Jewish high society shared so many characteristics and were linked in public opinion, they attracted similar criticisms. Like Jewish members of French society in the 1880s, Impressionism was accused of being foreign and anti-French, existing outside of true French tradition. As Proust demonstrated, both the Impressionists and their Jewish patrons were accused of the most egregious of crimes—bad taste; but it was Jewish high society's continued support of the style throughout the Belle Époque

<sup>16</sup> Charles Ephrussi, "Exposition des artistes indépendants," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 21 (1 May 1880): 486.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Thomson, *Degas: Waiting* (Malibu, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995), 33.

<sup>19</sup> See Edmond de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Family's Century of Love and Loss* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 67-90, for information on Charles Ephrussi's collection of Impressionist paintings.

<sup>20</sup> Ephrussi, "Exposition des artistes indépendants," 486.

<sup>21</sup> Norma Broude, *Impressionism: A Feminist Reading* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 124.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in de Waal, *Hare with Amber Eyes*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Kolb and Jean Adhémar, "Charles Ephrussi: Secrétaires; Laforgue, A. Renan, Proust, sa *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 6 (1984): 29-41.

<sup>24</sup> See Juliet Simpson, "Bourget, Laforgue, and Impressionism's Inside Story," *French Studies* 4 (2001): 467-83, for an analysis of Jules Laforgue's groundbreaking "scientific" interpretation of Impressionism.

that is largely responsible for Impressionism's overwhelming popularity in the twentieth century. The French traditions of adventurous patronage of modernism and generous donations to state museums had their origins in the *salons juifs* of

the 1870s and 1880s, where figures like Fanny and Charles Ephrussi enjoyed a great deal of influence over some of the wealthiest patrons of art in France.

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Figure 1. Pierre Auguste Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 1880-81, oil on canvas, 51 1/4 x 69 1/8 in.; 130.175 x 175.5775 cm., The Phillips Collection.



Figure 2. Édouard Manet, *Bundle of Asparagus*, 1880, oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum.



Figure 3. Édouard Manet, *The Asparagus*, 1880, oil on canvas, 16.5 x 21.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay.



Figure 4. Léon Bonnat, *Charles Ephrussi*, 1906, oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm, Private Collection.



Figure 5. Carl and Félicie Bernstein's Music Room, before 1900.





[top, left] Figure 6. Pierre Auguste Renoir, *Irène Cahen d'Anvers*, 1880, oil on canvas, 64 x 54 cm, Private Collection.

[top, right] Figure 7. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Cahen d'Anvers Girls*, 1881, oil on canvas, 119 x 74 cm, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand.

[right] Figure 8. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Albert Cahen d'Anvers*, 1881, oil on canvas, 113 x 97.2 x 8.3 cm (44 1/2 x 38 1/4 x 3 1/4 in.), The J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center.





Figure 9. Jean Béraud, *Soirée at the Hôtel Caillebotte*, 1878, oil on canvas, H. 1 ; L. 1,513 m., Musée d'Orsay.

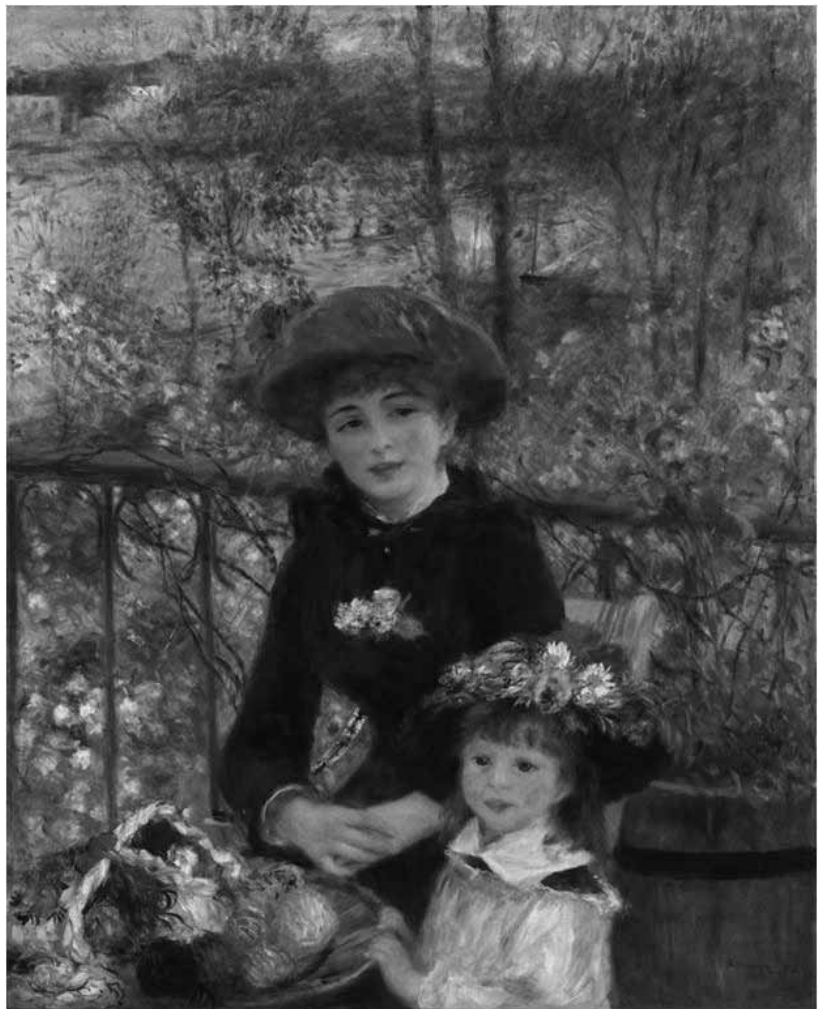


Figure 10. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Two Sisters on a Terrace*, 1881, oil on canvas, 100.5 x 81 cm, Art Institute of Chicago.