

“Femininity” and Artistic Value Judgment in 19th-Century French Art Criticism

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Abstract:

19th-century French art criticism was deeply influenced by patriarchal culture. The socially constructed “femininity” became a key criterion for judging the works of female artists, leading to obvious gender bias. Existing research mostly focuses on individual case studies, with little systematic discussion of how “femininity” shaped artistic value judgments. This paper takes Morisot, Cassatt, Bonheur, etc. as case studies, combining image analysis and socio-historical perspectives to examine the gender discourse mechanism in 19th-century French art criticism. The study finds that critics regarded male aesthetics as orthodox and adopted a double standard: while acknowledging the delicate emotions and soft formal beauty of women’s works, they also restricted their choice of subject matter by gender labels and belittled their technique and intellectual depth, thereby marginalizing female artists for a long time. This study reveals the profound influence of gender discourse on art criticism, fills a gap in domestic research, and provides a reference for reflecting on gender inequality in the art world and building a fairer, more diverse art evaluation system.

Keywords:

19th-Century French Art Criticism, Femininity, Artistic Value Judgment, Women Artists

1. Introduction

French society in the 19th century underwent dramatic transformations. Artistic schools changed frequently, and art criticism matured, deeply intervening in aesthetic judgment and value definition. As women’s education became more widespread, female creators gradually entered the art world, but they faced systematic prejudice in the male-dominated critical system. The “femininity” constructed by patriarchal culture became a core yardstick for judging the works of female artists, profoundly affecting their creative direction and historical positioning. Currently, international scholarship – represented by Nochlin, Garrard, Duncan, etc. – has revealed the marginalization of female artists from the dimensions of institution, exhibition, and public space. Although domestic research has paid attention to important figures such as Morisot and Cassatt, it mostly remains at the level of stylistic analysis of individual cases, lacking a systematic examination of how “femininity” shaped art value judgment and the internal mechanism of forming double standards. In view of this, this paper focuses on 19th-century French art criticism, exploring the social construction of “femininity” and its operational logic in art evaluation, re-examining

the influence of gender discourse on art value judgment, filling the gap in current research, and providing ideas for reflecting on gender inequality in the art field and improving feminist art history writing. This study comprehensively uses literature research, case analysis, image analysis, and socio-historical analysis, combined with in-depth analysis of representative artists' works.

2. Overview of the Development of 19th-Century French Art Criticism

2.1. The Rise and Development of Art Criticism

The 19th century in France experienced profound social transformations. Political, economic, and cultural upheavals provided fertile ground for the rise and development of art criticism. From the Napoleonic era to the Bourbon Restoration, then to the July Monarchy, the Second Republic, and the Second Empire, social unrest stimulated reflection on ideology and culture. Art, as an important component of culture, became a focal point of attention. Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution drove rapid economic development, accelerated urbanization, and led to the rise of the new bourgeoisie. The demand for art grew, and the art market gradually prospered.

Against this background, art criticism, as a bridge connecting artistic creation, the market, and the public, rose rapidly[1].

In the early 19th century, French art criticism was still in its infancy. Its form and content were relatively simple, mainly revolving around official art exhibitions. Critics were mostly men of letters, artists, or amateurs who published brief comments in newspapers and periodicals, focusing on the subject matter, technique, and expression of the works, but lacking in-depth theoretical analysis. For example, at the 1817 Salon exhibition, critics praised David's Neoclassical works for their rigorous composition and accurate modeling, while they held a conservative attitude toward innovative works. Although not mature, the criticism of this period laid the foundation for subsequent development, cultivated a readership concerned with art, and prompted artists to value critics' opinions.

Over time, by the mid-19th century, art criticism entered an important stage of development. With the emergence of movements such as Romanticism, Realism, and the Barbizon School, artistic styles diversified, and critical content became richer and deeper. Critics were no longer limited to formal evaluation but paid attention to the social significance, cultural connotations, and creative motivations of artists. For example, Romantic critics appreciated the passion and imagination in Delacroix's works, while Realist critics praised Courbet's truthful depiction of the lives of the lower classes. Moreover, professional critics such as Théophile Gautier appeared. They applied systematic theories and methods to analyze works, emphasized the formal beauty and independence of art, and promoted art criticism as an independent discipline.

In the late 19th century, the rise of Impressionism had a huge impact on the art world, and art criticism entered a new phase. Impressionism broke traditional painting concepts, emphasizing light, color, and the capture of fleeting impressions, sparking widespread controversy. Critics' attitudes were polarized: some critics opposed Impressionism, believing that its works lacked form and structure; others supported its innovative value – Zola, for instance, highly praised the works of Monet and others, considering them to reflect a new perspective on modern life. During this period, the

influence of art criticism further expanded and became a topic of public concern. Critics guided the public's understanding of art through newspapers, exhibition catalogs, and other media, while also influencing the development of the art market. For example, the endorsement of Impressionism by well-known critics helped increase their market value.

2.2. Main Forms of Art Criticism and Representative Figures

19th-century French art criticism exhibited a rich variety of forms. Different forms analyzed and evaluated artworks from different angles and methods, reflecting the diversity and complexity of art criticism at the time. These forms were not only influenced by the socio-cultural trends of the time but also closely related to the development of artistic creation; they intertwined and jointly promoted the development of art criticism.

2.2.1. Social Criticism

Social criticism was an important form of art criticism in 19th-century France. It emphasized the close connection between art and society, holding that art is a reflection of social life and can reveal social issues and contradictions [2]. The representative figure Taine, in his *Philosophy of Art*, analyzed artworks from the three elements of race, environment, and epoch. He believed that race influences the artist's style, the environment shapes the development of art, and the epoch reflects the spiritual outlook of a particular period. For example, when analyzing Italian Renaissance painting, Taine pointed out that Italy's geography, climate, and prosperous commercial culture provided the soil for art, while the Renaissance's concern for humanity gave the works a unique style and humanistic spirit. Social criticism provided a macro perspective for art criticism, helping people understand art from its social background [3].

2.2.2. Biographical Criticism

Biographical criticism also occupied an important position in 19th-century French art criticism. It mainly explained works by studying the artist's life experiences, personality traits, and creative motivations [4]. The representative figure Sainte-Beuve believed that understanding the artist's life is the key to understanding their work. For example, when studying Stendhal, he examined in detail his upbringing and years living in Italy, believing that these experiences deeply influenced his insight into human nature and criticism of social reality. Biographical criticism was equally applicable in the art field. For example, the study of Degas's paintings would focus on his aristocratic background, his love of ballet, and his interactions with the Impressionist painters – factors that influenced his choice of subject matter and expressive techniques, making his depictions of ballet dancers capture both instantaneous movement and aristocratic observation.

2.2.3. Formalist Criticism

Formalist criticism focused on analyzing the formal elements of artworks, such as line, color, composition, and modeling, emphasizing the formal beauty and independence of artworks. This form of criticism held that the value of an artwork lies in its form itself, not in the content or ideas it conveys. For example, Clive Bell proposed the theory of "significant form," arguing that the essence of an artwork lies in its ability to evoke a unique aesthetic emotion, which is determined by the formal

structure of the work. In 19th-century French art criticism, formalist criticism was also evident. Some critics, when evaluating the works of the Impressionist painters, began to pay attention to their innovative use of color and light and shadow, as well as their unique compositions. For instance, Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*, with its unique color and light effects, broke the traditional painting's precise depiction of object shapes and details, emphasizing the instantaneous visual impression [5]. Formalist critics believed that the value of this work lies in its presentation of a new aesthetic experience through a unique formal language, allowing the viewer to feel the ever-changing nature and the beautiful fusion of light and color.

2.2.4. Psychological Criticism

Psychological criticism uses psychological theories and methods to analyze artworks and the creative psychology of artists. In 19th-century France, although modern psychology was not yet fully mature, there were already some critics who analyzed art from a psychological perspective. They began to pay attention to the influence of the artist's subconscious, emotions, dreams, and other factors on creation. For example, some critics, when analyzing Delacroix's Romantic paintings, believed that the strong emotional expression and fantastic imagination in his works were closely related to his inner emotional conflicts and desire for freedom. Delacroix's paintings are often full of passion and movement, with bright and intense colors – characteristics seen as external manifestations of his subconscious emotions. Later, with the development of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, psychological criticism was further developed and applied in the 20th century, but 19th-century French psychological criticism laid the foundation for it [6].

2.3. The Influence of Art Criticism on Artistic Development

19th-century French art criticism had a profound impact on the development of art, promoting the evolution of art movements and deeply influencing artists' creative ideas and methods.

In terms of the evolution of art movements, art criticism played an important role. During the Neoclassical period, critics admired classical art and emphasized traditional aesthetic norms, providing theoretical support for the development of Neoclassicism. David's *Oath of the Horatii* was highly praised for its rigorous composition and historical subject matter, becoming a classic of Neoclassicism and attracting many artists to follow this style.

With social change, Romantic art emerged. Critics gave positive evaluations to the emotional expression, individuality, and pursuit of freedom in Romanticism. Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* was praised for its intense colors and revolutionary spirit, becoming a representative of Romanticism; the support of critics helped Romanticism gradually gain social recognition and break the dominance of Neoclassicism.

The development of Realist art also benefited from the help of critics. Courbet's *The Stone Breakers*, which directly depicted the hard life of ordinary laborers, was appreciated by critics for its profound social significance and critical spirit. Advocated by critics, Realism became one of the important art movements in 19th-century France.

The rise of Impressionism was closely related to art criticism. Although it was initially questioned by traditional critics, forward-looking critics such as Zola

supported the innovative value of Monet's works, believing they presented a new artistic perspective and aesthetic concept. The support of these critics gradually made Impressionism accepted by the public and laid the foundation for the development of modern art movements.

In terms of artistic creation, criticism provided feedback and guidance to artists. While creating *The Source*, Ingres adjusted his creative direction according to critics' opinions, paying more attention to observation of real life. Cézanne, inspired by formalist criticism, explored the formal structure of painting, laying the foundation for the development of Cubism and other modern art movements. Renoir, because critics praised his works, gained more social attention and financial support, allowing him to focus on creation and improve his artistic level [7].

In addition, art criticism helped artists build artistic self-confidence and social status. When an artist's work is recognized and praised by critics, they receive more social attention and support, which helps them gain a foothold in the art world and continue creating. For example, Renoir's paintings, with their delicate brushwork, soft colors, and beautiful depictions of female figures, were loved by critics. The critics' praise made Renoir's works popular on the art market, and he gained more creative opportunities and financial support, enabling him to focus more on artistic creation and continuously improve his artistic level.

3. The Construction and Connotation of the Concept of "Femininity"

3.1. The Construction of Femininity under Patriarchal Culture

In the social context of 19th-century France, patriarchal culture was like an invisible and tenacious net, deeply enveloping all levels of society and exerting a profound and decisive influence on the construction of "femininity." Patriarchal culture centers on men, taking male values, behavior patterns, and social roles as standards and norms, while women are placed in a subordinate and secondary position. Against this cultural background, "femininity" was defined and shaped as a series of traits and behaviors that conform to male expectations and social norms [8].

From the perspective of social reality, the social structure and institutional arrangements of 19th-century France reinforced the subordinate status of women [9]. Within the family, women were expected to take on the responsibility of caring for the family and bearing and raising children; their sphere of activity was mainly confined to the domestic sphere, and they were economically dependent on men. This positioning of family roles greatly restricted women's independence and autonomy in society. For example, under the laws of the time, women faced many restrictions in terms of property inheritance and marriage autonomy. After marriage, a woman's property often belonged to her husband, and she lacked equal voice and decision-making power in the marital relationship [10]. In education, women were also discriminated against, with very few opportunities to receive higher education. This made women relatively narrow in knowledge and intellectual horizons, making it difficult for them to play an important role in the public sphere of society. These social realities together shaped the image of women as weak, dependent, and submissive, which became an important part of "femininity."

Literary and artistic fiction, as an important carrier of patriarchal culture, also continuously constructed and disseminated specific concepts of "femininity." In 19th-

century French literary, painting, theatrical, and other artistic works, female figures were often portrayed as objects of male desire and accessories. For example, in many literary works, women are depicted as beautiful, gentle, and kind, but these traits are often to satisfy male aesthetic and emotional needs. Their existence mainly serves to set off male bravery, wisdom, and strength. As in Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*, the female character Milady, although beautiful and scheming, has her fate always controlled by men, becoming a tool of male power struggles. In the field of painting, Ingres's *The Source* depicts a young, beautiful girl with graceful posture and innocent expression, presenting an idealized female beauty. However, this beauty is more often from a male perspective, treating women as objects of admiration, emphasizing their external image and softness. Through the fictionalization and shaping of female images, these artistic works deeply implanted specific concepts of "femininity" into people's consciousness, influencing society's perception and evaluation of women.

At the ideological level, patriarchal culture spread its norms and expectations of women through various channels. Religious teachings, moral codes, and public opinion all emphasized the "femininity" that women should possess. Christian teachings emphasizing women's humility and obedience became an important basis for society's moral norms for women. In public opinion, if a woman displayed behaviors that deviated from traditional "femininity," such as being too independent, autonomous, or having strong personal opinions, she would often be socially condemned and excluded. This ideological pressure forced women to internalize these norms and expectations, striving to shape a "femininity" that met social expectations. For example, society generally believed that women should be dignified, reserved, and behave according to the standards of a lady. If a woman behaved too lively or boldly in public, she would be seen as improper or lacking in upbringing. This ideological constraint not only limited women's personal development but also further consolidated patriarchal culture's construction of "femininity."

3.2. The Connotation of Femininity in the Social Context of 19th-Century France

In the social context of 19th-century France, "femininity" was endowed with rich and unique connotations, deeply rooted in the social and cultural soil of the time, reflected in all aspects of women's lives, from behavior to aesthetic concepts, all profoundly influenced by the notion of "femininity."

In terms of behavior, 19th-century French society expected women to exhibit traits of gentleness, submissiveness, dignity, and reserve. Women were taught to speak softly and avoid loud noises, as speaking loudly was considered unladylike and a lack of femininity. In social situations, women's sitting and standing postures were strictly regulated. They were generally required to sit upright with legs together and hands placed gracefully on the knees; when standing, they should hold their heads up and chest out, maintaining an upright posture to show elegant manners. For example, in aristocratic social activities at the time, women's every move was subject to strict scrutiny; they had to follow these behavioral norms to demonstrate their good upbringing and noble temperament. When interacting with others, women were expected to be submissive and considerate, respecting men's opinions and decisions. They were often expected to be virtuous wives and helpful partners to men, playing supporting and auxiliary roles in the family and society.

In family life, women's primary duty was to take care of the home and family. They were responsible for household management, including cooking, cleaning, sewing,

etc., as well as educating children and cultivating their good moral character and behavioral habits. The role of mother was considered one of the most important roles for women, and society emphasized that women should possess gentle, loving maternal qualities and devote themselves wholeheartedly to their children's growth. Literary works of the time also often depicted such female images – for example, some of Balzac's mother figures, who quietly dedicated themselves to their families and children, showing selfless maternal love and resilient qualities.

In terms of aesthetic concepts, 19th-century French society had specific aesthetic standards for women's appearance and clothing. During this period, fair skin was regarded as an important sign of female beauty because it symbolized nobility and elegance. To keep their skin fair, women usually avoided prolonged exposure to the sun and would wear wide-brimmed hats and gloves when going out. A plump figure was also admired, considered a symbol of women's health and fertility. In Ingres's *The Source*, the girl's body lines are rounded and full, showing a healthy and graceful feminine beauty.

In terms of clothing, the styles and materials of women's dresses also reflected the aesthetic requirements of "femininity." The popular women's dress styles of the time focused on emphasizing women's curves, with corsets and wide skirts becoming fashionable. Corsets could tighten the waist, making the female figure present a slender hourglass shape and highlighting curves; wide skirts added elegance and softness. The materials used for clothing were mostly soft, luxurious fabrics such as silk, lace, and velvet, which not only felt comfortable but also showed women's nobility and refinement. For example, at court balls or important social events, women would wear gorgeous long dresses decorated with exquisite lace and jewelry, demonstrating their noble status and elegant temperament.

In terms of hairstyles and makeup, 19th-century French women also pursued styles consistent with "femininity." Complex and elaborate hairstyles were the trend of the time; women would spend a lot of time and energy on their hair, arranging it into various ornate updos and matching them with fine hair accessories. In terms of makeup, women usually used light blush and lipstick to add color and beauty, but the overall makeup remained light and natural, avoiding being too heavy and gaudy, so as not to be considered vulgar and undignified.

3.3. The Presentation of Femininity in Artworks

In 19th-century French artistic creation, femininity was presented in artworks in various ways. Painting and literature, as two important art forms, used their unique expressive techniques to create diverse female images, showing the rich connotations and unique charm of "femininity."

In the field of painting, the portrayal of female figures was an important way to present femininity. Painters depicted the gentleness, elegance, and fragility of women through careful attention to details such as the female figure's posture, expression, and clothing. Ingres's *The Source* is a classic example of this. In the painting, a young girl holds a jar with both hands, and water flows out from the jar. The girl's body lines are graceful and smooth; her posture is dignified and natural; she tilts her head slightly, her eyes are clear and pure, revealing an innocent and pure temperament. Her skin is delicate and smooth, as white as ivory, giving a soft, delicate feeling. The girl has few ornaments, only a white cloth lightly draped around her waist, highlighting her simplicity and purity. The overall tone of the picture is fresh and elegant, mainly

blue-green, creating a tranquil, serene atmosphere, further enhancing the girl's pure temperament. Through the careful shaping of the girl's image, Ingres vividly displays the femininity admired by 19th-century French society, allowing the viewer to directly feel the softness and purity of women.

Besides the posture and expression of the figure, the use of color also plays a key role in presenting femininity. Different colors often have different symbolic meanings, and painters skillfully use color to convey women's emotions, personalities, and temperament. In the works of the Impressionist painters, the use of color is particularly prominent. For example, Renoir's paintings often use bright, warm colors to depict female figures, showing the vitality and tenderness of women. In *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, Renoir uses rich, soft colors such as pink, yellow, and orange to depict a group of people enjoying lunch on a boat, with the female figures especially striking. The women in the picture wear brightly colored dresses; their skin looks rosy and lustrous under the sunlight; their smiles are bright and moving; the whole picture is filled with a joyful, cheerful atmosphere, showing the youthful vitality and gentle charm of women. This use of color not only gives the picture strong visual impact but also vividly conveys the inner temperament and emotions of women [11].

Literature was also an important vehicle for presenting femininity. Writers used delicate written descriptions to deeply portray the inner world of women, showing the complexity and diversity of femininity. In Dumas fils's *La Dame aux Camélias*, the female character Marguerite is vivid and unique. Marguerite was born poor, forced to become a courtesan, but deep down she is kind and pure, yearning for true love. Dumas fils, through descriptions of Marguerite's language, behavior, and psychological activities, shows her helplessness and struggle in a complex social environment, as well as her persistence and courage in love. Although Marguerite lives in the extravagant upper class, she does not pursue material enjoyment but rather spiritual satisfaction. Her love story with Armand shows her gentle, affectionate side, while also revealing her strength and helplessness in the face of social pressure. Through the character of Marguerite, Dumas fils breaks the traditional stereotype of women in literature, showing the diversity and richness of femininity

Maupassant's short story *The Necklace* features Mathilde as a typical example. Mathilde comes from a petty-bourgeois family; she is beautiful and moving, but dissatisfied with her current life, full of desire for material things and social status. Maupassant, through psychological descriptions of Mathilde, such as her anticipation and excitement about attending a ball, and the panic and despair after losing the necklace, profoundly shows her vanity and desire to change her destiny. At the same time, the tenacity and courage Mathilde shows during the process of repaying the necklace reveal her strong side. Through the character of Mathilde, Maupassant shows the living conditions and psychological characteristics of women in 19th-century French society, revealing the influence of society on women and the difficulties women face in pursuing self-worth [12].

4. The Relationship between “Femininity” and the Judgment of Artistic Value

4.1. Evaluation Tendencies toward Female Artists in Art Criticism

In the context of 19th-century French art criticism, the evaluation of female artists was deeply influenced by the concept of “femininity,” presenting a complex and

subtle situation. On the one hand, some critics positively affirmed the “femininity” displayed in the works of female artists, believing that these traits added unique charm to the works; on the other hand, this “femininity” often became a shackle that limited the evaluation of female artists’ artistic value, leading to the underestimation of their works in art history.

Some art critics positively evaluated the delicate emotions and unique perspectives reflected in the works of female artists. Mary Cassatt, as an outstanding female artist in the 19th-century French art world, was known for her delicate depictions of women’s life scenes. Her works often focus on the intimate relationship between mother and child, as well as the emotional experiences of women in family life. Art critics appreciated her ability to capture, from a unique female perspective, those emotional moments and details of life that male artists often overlooked. For example, in her painting *The Bath* (Figure 1), the scene of a mother gently bathing her child is depicted in meticulous detail: the mother’s focused expression, the child’s innocent smile, and the soft light and colors create a warm, tranquil atmosphere, showing the tenderness and love deep within a woman. Critics believed that this delicate emotional expression and unique depiction of family life were the unique charm of Cassatt’s works, reflecting the unique advantages that female artists have in artistic creation.



Figure 1. Mary Cassatt, *The Bath* (Source: Baidu Baike).

Berthe Morisot’s works were also praised for their delicate emotions and unique perspective. Morisot was an important female Impressionist painter; her works mainly depicted women’s daily lives, with soft colors and delicate brushstrokes. In her painting *Summer* (Figure 2), a young woman sits in a garden; sunlight filters through the leaves onto her; the woman’s expression is carefree; the surrounding flowers and trees are depicted with vitality. Through delicate colors and agile brushstrokes, this work shows the comfort and beauty of women in nature, as well as women’s keen perception of life. Critics believed that Morisot’s works are full of female-specific emotions and aesthetic experiences; she could show the poetry and beauty of life from a unique perspective, injecting new vitality into Impressionist painting.



Figure 2. Berthe Morisot, *Summer* (Source: Baidu Baike).

However, this affirmation based on “femininity” had clear limitations. Critics generally confined female artists’ creation to traditional female subject matter such as family and emotion, viewing it as a natural advantage; once women attempted grand themes such as history or mythology, or broke away from the soft, emotional stylistic framework, they were questioned and denied, considered lacking in vigor and intellectual depth. This judgment simply equated “femininity” with weakness, delicacy, and emotionality, ignoring the creative potential and innovative possibilities of female artists.

Art critics also often used the creative standards of male artists to measure the works of female artists, which also led to unfair evaluations of female artists. In the 19th-century French art world, male artists dominated artistic creation, and their creative styles and aesthetic standards were regarded as the orthodoxy of art. When the works of female artists did not conform to these standards, they were often belittled or ignored by critics. For example, in terms of painting technique, traditional painting techniques emphasize precision of line, rigor of modeling, and richness of color – techniques considered to be the strong points of male artists. Female artists, on the other hand, might pay more attention to the softness of color, the agility of brushwork, and the expression of emotion; this different style was often seen by critics as insufficient skill or immaturity. When evaluating the works of Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, although she was famous for her exquisite portrait skills and painted many fine portraits for the French royal family and European nobility, some critics still believed that her works were inferior to those of male artists in technique, lacking a kind of majestic artistic appeal [13]. This practice of evaluating female artists’ works by male standards undoubtedly limited the artistic development and full reflection of the artistic value of female artists.

4.2. The Use of “Femininity” in Art Criticism and Its Influence on the Aesthetic Value of Artworks

In 19th-century French art criticism, “femininity” was often used as an important criterion for judging artworks, and this criterion profoundly affected people’s understanding and evaluation of artworks. Some artworks were praised for displaying “femininity,” while others were criticized for not conforming to this standard. Through the analysis of specific artworks, we can more clearly understand the application of this evaluation criterion in art criticism and its influence on the aesthetic value of artworks.

4.2.1. The Use of “Femininity” in Art Criticism

“Femininity,” as a criterion of judgment, not only reflected the social stereotypes of women’s roles at the time but also greatly influenced the acceptance of artworks. For example, Mary Cassatt’s *Mother and Child* series fully displays the delicate and unique perspective of a female artist on family life. In *The Bath* (Figure 1), the scene of a mother gently bathing her child is depicted very vividly. The mother’s slightly forward-leaning body, focused gaze, and gentle movements all show the tenderness and delicacy of maternal love. The child’s innocent expression and tender body complement the mother’s image, creating a warm, intimate atmosphere. Cassatt uses soft tones such as pink and light yellow, which not only add warmth to the picture but also further strengthen the femininity conveyed by the work.

From the perspective of art criticism, this work was praised by many critics precisely for its display of “femininity.” Critics believed that Cassatt, through

depicting the traditional female subject of mother and child, showed the emotional world deep within women; this emotional expression is delicate and authentic, possessing a unique artistic appeal. For example, art critic John Ruskin once commented on Cassatt's works: "In a delicate and unique way she shows the beauty of family life; her works are full of warmth and love, a profound interpretation of the female emotional world." This evaluation based on "femininity" gave Cassatt's works a certain recognition in the art world of the time and secured her a place in art history.

However, not all works that exhibit "femininity" received unanimous praise. When "femininity" was overemphasized or conflicted with traditional aesthetic standards, works could also be criticized. Some of Berthe Morisot's works encountered such a situation. Morisot was an important Impressionist painter; her works often took women as subjects, with soft colors and delicate brushstrokes, showing a unique femininity. In her work *Summer* (Figure 2), a young woman sits in a garden; sunlight filters through the leaves onto her; the woman's expression is carefree; the surrounding flowers and trees are depicted with vitality. This work, with its delicate emotions and unique perspective, shows the beautiful state of women in nature [14].

However, some critics believed that Morisot's works focused too much on emotional expression and the expression of personal feelings, while being relatively weak in technique and composition. They believed that artworks should have a more rigorous structure and more exquisite technique, while Morisot's works seemed to tend to express a weak, sentimental "femininity," which did not conform to traditional aesthetic standards. For example, critic Jules Castagnary criticized Morisot's works: "Her works lack strength and depth, focus too much on superficial emotional expression, and ignore the essence of art." This criticism reflects the conflict between "femininity" and traditional aesthetic standards in 19th-century French art criticism. When a work overemphasizes "femininity," it may be considered lacking in artistic depth and strength, thus affecting its status in art value judgment.

Rosa Bonheur's works provide a different perspective. She was known for depicting animals and rural life, and her style was relatively tough, different from the traditional image of "femininity." In her representative work *The Horse Fair*, Bonheur depicts the bustling scene at a horse fair with delicate and vivid brushstrokes; numerous horses and people are arranged in a staggered manner in the picture, showing a vibrant sense of power. Her grasp of the form and movement of animals is very precise; through detailed depiction of muscles, bones, and hair, she shows the strength and vitality of the animals. However, this style also made her works face some controversy in art criticism. Some critics believed that her works lacked the softness and delicacy expected of women, looking more like the works of a male artist. They believed that female artists should focus on traditional female subjects such as family and emotion, while Bonheur's works displayed a strength and masculinity beyond traditional "femininity." This evaluation reflects the limitations of "femininity" as a criterion in 19th-century French art criticism. When the works of female artists did not conform to the traditional image of "femininity," they were often criticized and questioned, which also limited the freedom and diversity of female artists in artistic creation.

4.2.2. The Influence of "Femininity" on the Aesthetic Value of Artworks

Elements of "femininity" were widely present in 19th-century French artworks, exerting a multi-dimensional profound influence on the aesthetic value of the works.

This influence is reflected in key aspects such as emotional expression and formal beauty, adding unique charm and connotation to the artworks.

At the level of emotional expression, “femininity” makes it easier for artworks to convey delicate, gentle emotions, eliciting strong emotional resonance from the audience. Take Cassatt’s *The Bath* (Figure 1) as an example: the mother gently bathes her child; her eyes are full of love and focus; the child’s innocent expression and tender body complement each other, creating a warm, intimate atmosphere. Through the delicate depiction of this daily scene of mother and child, the work vividly displays the universal emotion of maternal love. When viewing this work, the audience is easily moved by the warm emotions conveyed in the picture, recalling their own intimate moments with loved ones, thus generating strong emotional resonance. This emotional expression based on “femininity” gives the work powerful emotional appeal and enhances its aesthetic value. It allows the audience to not only appreciate a picture but also experience an emotion, feeling the beauty and warmth of humanity.

From the perspective of formal beauty, “femininity” is often closely linked to formal elements such as soft colors and smooth lines, bringing a unique visual enjoyment to the works. In the field of painting, Ingres’s *The Source* is a classic example of the perfect combination of “femininity” and formal beauty. In the picture, the young girl holds a jar with both hands, and water flows out from the jar. The girl’s body lines are graceful and smooth, like a silent melody, giving a soft, elegant feeling. Her skin is delicate and smooth, appearing especially soft under the light and shadow. The overall tone of the picture is fresh and elegant, mainly blue-green, creating a tranquil, serene atmosphere. This soft color and smooth lines work together to present a pure, elegant beauty, allowing the viewer to feel a visual harmony and comfort while appreciating the work.

Impressionist painter Renoir’s works also fully reflect the influence of “femininity” on formal beauty. He often used bright, warm colors to depict female figures, showing the vitality and tenderness of women. In *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (Figure 3), Renoir uses rich, soft colors such as pink, yellow, and orange to depict a group of people enjoying lunch on a boat, with the female figures especially striking. The women in the picture wear brightly colored dresses; their skin looks rosy and lustrous under the sunlight; their smiles are bright and moving. Through the clever use of color and the delicate depiction of the figures’ postures and expressions, Renoir fills the picture with a joyful, cheerful atmosphere, showing the youthful vitality and gentle charm of women. This unique formal beauty gives the work high artistic value, attracting audiences to constantly appreciate and savor it.



Figure 3. Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. (Source: Baidu Baike.)

In literary works, “femininity” also adds unique aesthetic value to the works through delicate descriptions and unique narrative methods. For example, in Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux Camélias*, the character of Marguerite is full of “femininity.” Although she is a courtesan, she is kind and pure at heart, longing for true love [8]. Dumas fils, through delicate psychological descriptions, shows Marguerite’s struggles and pain in love, as well as her yearning for freedom and happiness. This delicate description allows readers to deeply understand Marguerite’s inner world, feel her emotional changes, and thus enhances the work’s appeal. At the same time, the narrative style of the novel is relatively euphemistic and delicate, like a gently flowing stream gradually unfolding the story. This narrative style complements Marguerite’s image full of “femininity,” adding a unique aesthetic charm to the work. While reading the novel, readers are not only attracted by the exciting story but also moved by the delicate emotions and unique narrative style contained in the work, gaining a unique aesthetic experience.

Through the analysis of works by Cassatt, Morisot, and Bonheur, we can see the complexity of “femininity” in art criticism. On the one hand, “femininity” can bring delicate emotional expression and unique formal beauty to artworks, enhancing the work’s appeal and aesthetic value; on the other hand, when “femininity” conflicts with traditional aesthetic standards, it can also negatively affect the work’s acceptance. This complex relationship reflects the stereotyped roles of women in 19th-century French society and the existence of gender bias in art criticism. Nevertheless, the works of these female artists have left an indelible mark on art history with their unique artistic charm and profound emotional expression, providing important inspiration and reference for later female artists.

5. Conclusions and Outlook

5.1. Summary of the Study

This study focuses on 19th-century French art criticism, analyzing the relationship between “femininity” and art value judgment, and revealing the socio-cultural connotations behind it. Under the patriarchal culture of the time, “femininity” was defined as traits such as gentleness and submission, influencing society’s expectations of women and the presentation of artworks. In art criticism, “femininity” became an important criterion. Some critics recognized the relevant traits in the works of female artists, such as Mary Cassatt (Figure 1) and Berthe Morisot (Figure 2). However, this affirmation had limitations: critics often confined female artists to traditional subject matter and measured their works by male standards, leading to unfair evaluation and underestimation of their works. When judging works by “femininity,” those that conform to traditional elements are likely to be praised, while those that deviate may be criticized – as seen with Rosa Bonheur’s works. “Femininity” has a multifaceted influence on the aesthetic value of works: while it can enhance emotional resonance and formal beauty, overemphasizing it may neglect other aspects such as technique. Through the analysis of works by Morisot and Cassatt, it is clear that “femininity” is both a creative advantage for female artists and a factor that restricts their artistic development and value judgment.

5.2. Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

Although this study has achieved some results in exploring the relationship between “femininity” and art value judgment in 19th-century French art criticism, it has limitations.

In terms of data collection, due to time and geographical constraints, important materials such as articles from niche periodicals and artists’ letters and diaries in private collections have not been fully explored, affecting the understanding of art criticism viewpoints and creative backgrounds. In terms of research perspective, it mainly focuses on the relationship between the two, with insufficient comprehensive consideration of factors such as social politics, economy, cultural trends, and the development of art movements that influenced art criticism, failing to show the diversity and complexity of art criticism. For example, the study does not deeply explore the relationship between art criticism and social and political change, nor the operational mechanisms of the art market. In terms of research methods, literature research, case studies, image analysis, and socio-historical analysis each have their limitations: literature is affected by authenticity; case studies cannot cover all situations; image interpretation has subjective differences; socio-historical analysis is not detailed enough to reveal causal relationships.

Future research can be carried out in multiple directions. In terms of data mining, expand the scope and channels of collection, cooperate with French institutions to obtain first-hand materials, and use digital technology to retrieve and organize, enriching the understanding of 19th-century French art criticism. In terms of research perspective, adopt an interdisciplinary approach, using theories and methods from sociology, psychology, cultural studies, etc., to analyze the relationship between art criticism and social class, creative psychology, cultural tradition, etc., breaking disciplinary boundaries. In terms of research methods, use text mining and data analysis techniques for quantitative analysis of literature; increase the number and diversity of case studies; combine artificial intelligence with image analysis; strengthen the study of historical details in socio-historical analysis. In addition, attention can be paid to its inspiration for contemporary art, such as breaking the shackles of gender concepts, establishing a fair evaluation system, cultivating gender equality awareness, and promoting the development of contemporary art toward equality, diversity, and inclusiveness.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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