

Claude Monet

Camille

Gloria Groom

In February 1866, having temporarily abandoned his monumental *Luncheon on the Grass* (cats. 38, 39), Claude Monet hurriedly prepared a new canvas showing his nineteen-year-old mistress, Camille Doncieux, in a green-and-black striped walking dress, small “Empire” bonnet, and fur-trimmed jacket (cat. 16). For an artist with no official academic standing at the Salon (where he refused to be listed as a student of his official teacher, Charles Gleyre), Monet’s life-size *Camille* was the equivalent of a Prix de Rome, his first success in the Parisian art world and his largest finished canvas to date.¹ It was both courageous and conservative, undertaken to garner critical support as well as to placate his aunt Marie-Jeanne Lecadre, who had threatened to cut off his monthly allowance.²

Portraits were a mainstay of the Salon of the Second Empire and in 1866 made up approximately one in seven of the 1,998 paintings listed in its catalogue. Some were designated by full names and titles, or more commonly by the euphemistic “Monsieur X,” “Madame X,” or “Mademoiselle X.” Just a handful of the portraits at the 1866 Salon, *Camille* among them, were titled with first names only.³ If Monet’s intention for *Camille* was to elevate his mistress to a bourgeois status more in keeping with his family’s, as Mary Gedo suggested, by titling it thusly he “inadvertently or purposefully, cast aspersions on the moral and social status of his companion.”⁴ *Camille* was deemed familiar but not recognizable, or, as Charles Blanc perceived, not quite a portrait.⁵ Devoid of anecdotal, moral, or physiognomic details, the painting was commented upon, if not admired, by almost every critic. Théophile Thoré, for example, praised the “large portrait of a standing woman seen from behind

trailing a magnificent green silk dress, as dazzling as the fabrics painted by Veronese.”⁶ Its subject appeared as a signifier of either the chic and elegant Parisienne or a *fille*, slang for a girl of easy virtue. A caricature of the portrait section of the 1866 Salon published in *La Vie Parisienne* (fig. 1) indicates the painting’s unconventional nature: its huge scale was typically reserved for royal or distinguished personages, and it deviated from bourgeois portraiture, whose primary characteristic was flattering fidelity to physiognomic details. Set against a

FIG. 1. FÉLIX RÉGAMEY (FRENCH, 1844–1907). “The Portrait at This Year’s Salon,” *La Vie Parisienne*, May 5, 1866.







CAT. 16 Claude Monet (FRENCH, 1840–1926)
Camille, 1866

Oil on canvas
231 × 151 cm (90 ¹⁵/₁₆ × 59 ¹/₂ in.)
Kunsthalle Bremen

dark-red curtain in a neutral space, yet shown moving away from the viewer and dressed for the street, Monet’s monumental, unclassifiable figure stood apart from the smaller portrait and genre scenes popularized by artists like James Tissot and Alfred Stevens (fig. 3, p. 23; fig. 1, p. 34).

Other contemporary caricatures (see fig. 2) targeted the mixed, confusing codes offered by Monet’s portraitlike image of a nobody, her pose and setting denying the viewer the context to explain the scene. Conservation research carried out for the 2005 exhibition *Monet und Camille*, held at the Kunsthalle Bremen, revealed that in an earlier iteration Camille posed on an elaborate Oriental rug or carpet akin to that in the commissioned portrait of Madame Gaudibert that Monet painted two years later (cat. 97)—an interior that would have made Camille’s identity more readily legible.⁷

Instead, the only information offered resides in her dress and its exaggerated train. For Zola it was the dress that identified the wearer: “Notice the dress, how supple it is, how solid. It trails softly, it is alive, it declares loud and clear who this woman is.”⁸ But who she is remained in question. In his caricature of *Camille*, Bertall’s caption—“*Camille, ou Le souterrain*” (*Camille, or the underground*)—puns on the idea of the train as both a locomotive and a piece of fabric that is literally out of control, or, as Zola put it in his otherwise positive review, “plunging into the wall as if there were a hole there.”⁹ However much Camille’s facial characteristics differed from the expectations of traditional portraiture, the dress itself was reassuringly recognizable from contemporary fashion plates (see fig. 3).¹⁰ Two years later, when *Camille* was awarded a silver medal at the Exposition Maritime du Havre, for example, Léon Billot found the painting but a pretext for “the most splendid dress of green silk ever rendered by a paintbrush,” regarding the model herself “from the provocative way in which she tramps the pavement” to be “not a society woman but a Camille.”¹¹

Part of the ambiguity expressed by reviewers stemmed from the way the dress seemed to relate to its wearer. The caption accompanying Félix Régamey’s caricature (fig. 1) noted Camille’s dragging, uncrinolined dress and thumb-sucking, insinuating perhaps her childishness, as if she is



FIG. 2. BERTALL (ALBERT D'ARNOUX, FRENCH, 1820–1882). Detail of Monet's *Camille* from "The Salon of 1866," *Le Journal Amusant*, May 12, 1866.

FIG. 3. *Petit Courrier des Dames* 86 (November 18, 1865). Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek.



dressing up in clothes that are too big for her (fig. 1).¹² This idea of a childish woman dressing up in an overly large garment can also be seen in Bertall's caricature (fig. 2). The perceived excessiveness of her train also implies the idea of borrowed luxury; in yet another caricature, a small dog takes a ride on the dragging train (fig. 4). Despite Monet's choice of serious fashion to "dress up" his mistress, both sartorially and sociologically, the fit of the dress seems to have been unconvincing.

Recent interest in Monet's *Camille* has not fully addressed the existence and economics of the dress itself.¹³ The trendy silhouette and expensive fabrics featured in *Camille*'s silk *robe de promenade* (walking dress) and fur-trimmed *paletot* would have been outside the reach of most. Although a pattern for this outfit was available in the many fashion periodicals aimed at middle-class women, fabric and assembly would have been prohibitively expensive for the majority. Mark Roskill, who first posited the relationship of fashion plates to early Impressionist compositions, concluded that "in view of Monet's and *Camille*'s extreme poverty at this time, . . . some, and perhaps all, of the other costumes in question were in fact rented in Paris," though he did not offer any further information on where or how such rentals might have occurred.¹⁴

Costume historian Birgit Haase believes that *Camille* owned the summer dresses featured in *Women in the Garden* (cat. 45), based on what she considers *Camille*'s financially stable family and enthusiasm for stylish clothes (see p. 102).¹⁵ Little in fact is known about *Camille*'s economic situation at the time she posed for that painting. The daughter of a Lyonnais merchant, she met Monet in the summer of 1865, leaving the security of her family to follow Monet to Chailly, where she seems to have been as impoverished as he was. Unless, as Haase suggests, she owned these dresses while still with her family, it is unlikely she would have had access to the dresses featured in Monet's *Women in the Garden* or the green-and-black striped dress from February 1866.¹⁶ Depending on the fabric, having a dress made by a professional dressmaker was expensive.¹⁷ Although secondhand shops existed, the contemporaneity of this ensemble rules out such an origin. It is also possible—as suggested by a letter from Frédéric Bazille to his mother written in



CAT. 17 Promenade dress, 1865/68

English
Alpaca and silk fringe
Manchester City Galleries

January 1866, mentioning a green satin dress that he had rented—that Monet may have borrowed Camille’s dress from his friend.¹⁸ The other possibility is that Camille’s outfit was a department store purchase—a *robe mi-confectionnée*, or almost-ready-made dress—purchased off the rack and fitted to her by the store’s seamstresses. But even this would have been pricey; until later in the century, such machine-made items were just as costly as those made by couturiers.¹⁹

Much has been written about the impact of *grands magasins*, or department stores, on the democratization of fashion. What relationship did Zola’s fictional department store, Au Bonheur des Dames, have to the Impressionists’ choices of fashion? Their paintings do not allude to department stores explicitly, but the accessories, jackets, and even *robes mi-confectionnées* that they depicted were certainly available in department stores,

thanks to modern technologies that allowed the middle class access to machine-made laces, dress patterns, and standardized or even precut fabrics (see p. 64). Indeed, Monet’s painted silk may have originated, despite Bazille’s mention of a green satin dress, as a different fabric altogether. While we cannot know the status and price of the dress Camille wears, her stylishness is confirmed by the painting. In comparison to Monet’s portrait of Madame Gaudibert, a private commission that was never exhibited publicly, *Camille* was a manifesto that aimed to impress both the academic and avant-garde artistic communities. In the former, Monet looked to *peintres-couturiers* (fashion portraitists) like Stevens, trying to replicate the sheen of Madame Gaudibert’s lavish satin dress and tapestry shawl. With *Camille*, he instead chose to re-create a recognizable and fashionable ensemble not with the aims of a portraitist or photographer but as a strategy for expressing modern life.

Comparing Camille’s painted gown to a similar green-and-black striped dress from the same period (cat. 17) raises more questions about the meaning of Monet’s choice of garment and his adjustments to it. X-radiographs of the canvas reveal that in addition to painting over the patterned rug and toning down the floor-length drapery, the artist shortened the front hem of the dress and slimmed the silhouette by covering the dress’s outlines with the background color.²⁰ A comparison of the Salon version to the smaller replica of the painting commissioned by the Galerie Cadart and Luquet for an American client in 1866 (fig. 5) shows how Monet reinstated the full skirt in the latter work and increased the canvas’s width to accommodate it. Camille’s jacket is also more fitted in the smaller version of the painting, creating a dramatic silhouette, and though equally conspicuous, the train is more articulated, naturally conforming to Camille’s movements.

In the Salon version of *Camille*, Monet either diminished the effect of the wedge-shaped crinoline or Camille went without it. This would explain the noticeable drag of her train. It might also signal the artist’s ability to capture the subtleties of fashion’s vagaries. For although the crinoline was not abolished until 1868, already by 1865 it was losing ground, criticized for its exaggerated size and

FIG. 4. STOCK (G. GAUDET, FRENCH, ACTIVE 19TH CENTURY).

Page from *L'Épâtouffant*, salon du Havre (Victor Coupy, 1868).
Bibliothèque de la ville du Havre.

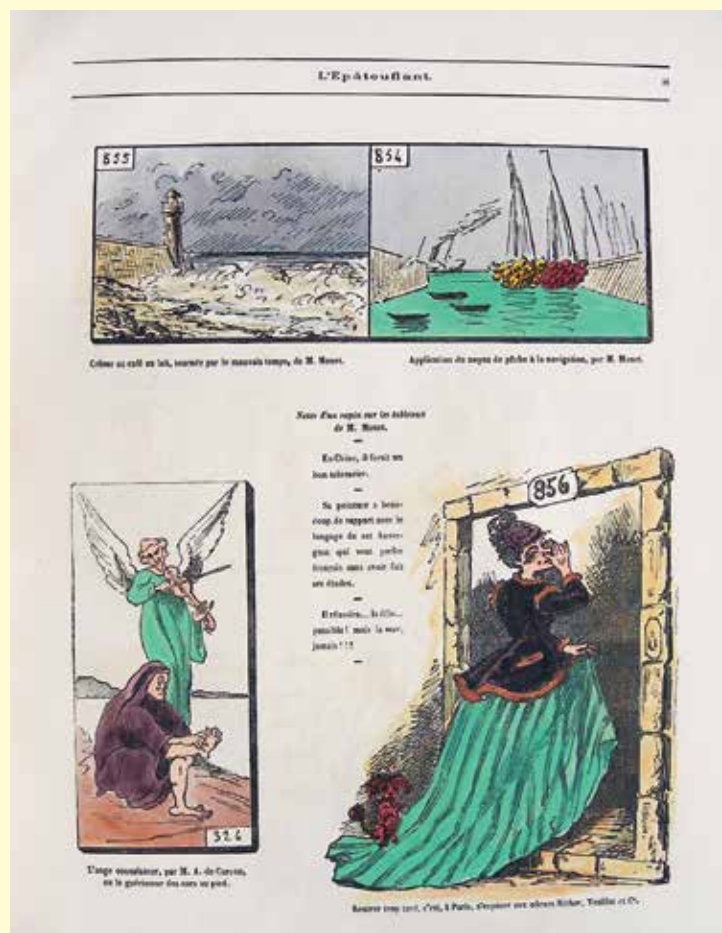




FIG. 5. CLAUDE MONET (FRENCH, 1840–1926). *Camille, the Green Dress*, 1866. Oil on canvas; 81.2 × 55.2 cm (32 × 21 ¾ in.). Muzeul Național de Artă al României, Bucharest, inv. 8268/302.

the extraordinary amount of fabric it required.²¹ Nonetheless, popular imagery from the second half of the nineteenth century often parodied or praised the crinoline as a standard trope for the bourgeois woman. An illustration by Félicien Rops, commissioned to accompany an article by Amédée Achard for his article in *Paris-guide, par les principaux écrivains et artistes de la France* (Paris Guide, by the Major Writers and Artists of France) in 1867, shows a woman in a dress with a train but no crinoline (fig. 6). The work's title, "Parisian Type: Bal Mabile" [*sic*], alludes to a popular but slightly risqué outdoor dance hall, while her dragging dress, her sly expression, and the fact that she literally "tramps the

pavement" provide unsubtle indicators of her "loose" moral character.²² What then was Monet's intention in removing Camille's crinoline? Was it Camille's choice to shed this cumbersome layer? Is *Camille* a prescient image, or the result of Monet reimagining the dress modeled by his mistress? In a painted study for the unrealized *Luncheon on the Grass* (cats. 38, 39), Camille is posed with a similar *profil perdu* and an equally unsupported train. It is possible that among the many items hauled from Paris to the forest of Chailly, where Monet first conceived his subject, the crinoline was less critical to the sketch, but would have featured in the final studio production. And yet the fact that volumetric, presumably crinolined dresses reappear in Monet's next composition, destined (but ultimately rejected) for the Salon of 1867, *Women in the Garden*, makes the crinoline's absence in *Camille* all the more puzzling.

Like the portrait itself, Camille's fashion statement defied easy categorization. Although wearing a recognizable fashion, she is not on display but on the go, reflecting Zola's distinction between artists who made fashion plates and artists who painted "from life" and with "all the love they [the painters] feel for their modern subjects."²³ Instead of showing off her finery, Camille leaves the interior (considered a woman's domain), physically and metaphorically abandoning the ties (or, in this case, steel-ribbed crinoline cage) that bind.

In the summer of 1867, Monet left Camille and their newborn son in Paris and returned to his family on the Normandy coast. He requested that Bazille and Zacharie Astruc send several paintings to him from Paris, especially *Camille* and his smaller replica of it. Clearly he wanted to use these two works, which represented his first noteworthy achievement in the larger Parisian art world, to advertise his talent and taste. Although nothing seems to have come of his strategy, the next summer he re-exhibited *Camille*, along with five other works, at the Exposition Maritime. Perhaps it is not surprising that the award-winning canvas was acquired shortly afterward by Arsène Houssaye, the longtime editor of *L'Artiste* and a popular commentator on feminine fashion. An excerpt from his series of books on the Parisienne, published in *L'Artiste* in August 1869, offered his very male-centric assessment of this type of woman and may well have been written with *Camille* in mind:

The Parisienne is not in fashion, she is fashion—whatever she does—whatever barbaric outfit she decides to wear, — When a provincial walks down the boulevard, one recognizes that her dress is brand new. The dress of the Parisienne could well date from that very instant, from [Charles Frederick] Worth or from any ordinary seamstress, and it will appear as if she’s been wearing it for a certain time. The Provincial is dressed by the dress, the Parisienne wears the dress.

And how much this dress is hers and not another’s! The dress is supple; the dress caresses her like a woman caresses a dress. If it’s a long dress, then she takes on a romantic, sentimental mood, her train languishing.²⁴

FIG. 6. FÉLICIEN ROPS (FRENCH, 1833–1898), engraved by M. Boetzel. “Parisian Type: Bal Mabile” [sic], *Paris-guide, par les principaux écrivains et artistes de la France* (1867), p. 1248.



In Houssaye’s mind, Monet had successfully transformed his mistress into a Parisienne, synonymous with style, seduction, and fashionability. Despite the ambiguity of the meaning of the dress and its wearer, Camille was seen as embodying *le chic*. She was a real someone, though not quite anyone—“a girl of our times,” as Zola put it in 1868 when comparing Monet’s *Camille* to Renoir’s *Lise* (cat. 40). Incongruously subverting traditional codes of legibility, *Camille* was also perceived as embodying Parisian femininity and style, an export commodity.²⁵

In his review of the 1879 Salon, the Symbolist poet and critic Joris-Karl Huysmans complained about artists who were more couturiers than painters, and whose elegantly clothed mannequins were but a pretext for modern life. In his view, the Impressionists trumped the more acclaimed fashion painters of the day in their understanding of modernity. For Huysmans the true artist revealed both a woman’s exterior and her interior without relying on the cut and fabric of her dress. Two women wearing the “same armor” by a famous couturier would still be recognized for what they were. In the Impressionists’ works, he concluded, “A tart is a tart and a society woman is a society woman.”²⁶ One wonders how Huysmans would have judged Monet’s *Camille*, neither trollop nor grande dame, whose true modernity resides in her dress—its fashion and fit—and the multiple readings of the model it provoked.