

Sex *in* the Cities



PARIS

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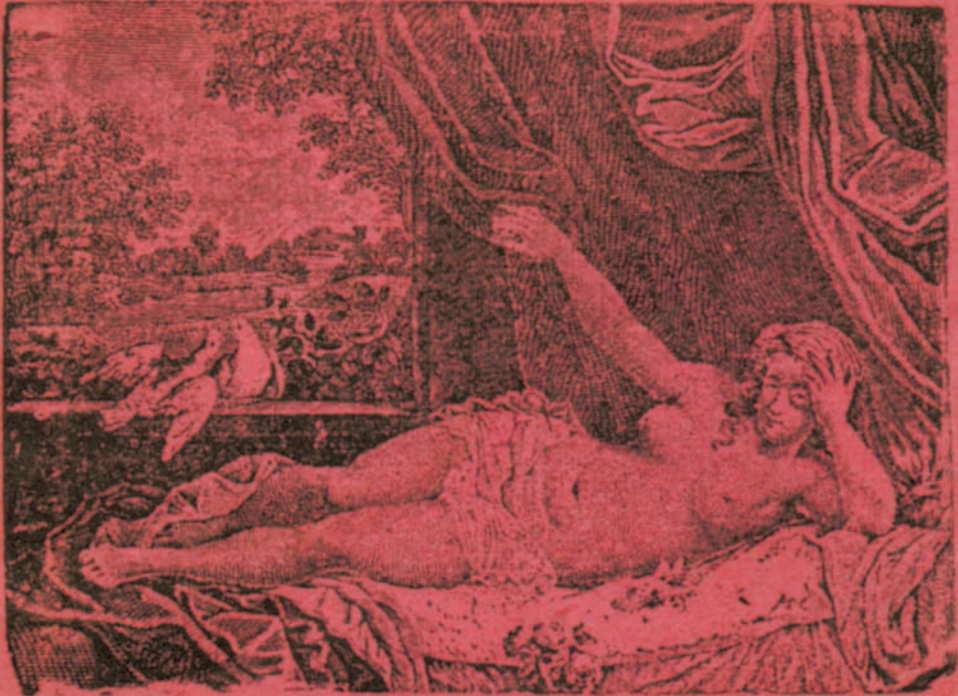


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Contents

Introduction	7
History: Middle Ages, Renaissance	25
The Golden Age of Eroticism	49
Romanticism	97
The Belle Époque and Montmartre	131
20 th Century – Modern Paris	151
Paris: The Imaginary Museum of Eroticism?	193
Bibliography	196
Index	198

ANNÉE 1910
GUIDE SECRET
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of Foreigner Bachelor in Paris.
ZERSTREUEN AMUSIEREN.



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Introduction

Paris: The City of Love?

Throughout the world, Paris is regarded as the “city of love and the erotic”. To this day, the ideal destination of any honeymoon is a trip to Paris. But it is not only for loving couples that this proud city continues to be an attraction – tourists in search of extra excitement in love also pursue their fantasies about Paris. This is made apparent in a rather dubious joke:

A man confesses to his male friend: “I’m off to Paris!”, his friend replies: “You bastard!” The man about to set off corrects him: “No, I’m not going on my own! I’m going with my wife!”; “You stupid bastard!” his friend immediately counters.

What does one expect to find in Paris that can’t be found in any other city nowadays? What is so special about its history that has given rise to this myth? In 1896, Pierre Louys made two comments in the foreword to his novel *Aphrodite*:

It seems that the genius of nations, as well as individuals, is, above all, sensual. All the cities that have ruled the world – Babylon, Alexandria, Athens, Venice, and Paris – have, as if following a universal rule, been all the more powerful according to how dissolute they were, as if their licentiousness were essential to their glory. Those cities, whose law-makers strove for an artificial, narrow-minded, and unproductive virtuousness, saw themselves condemned to destruction from day one.

Apart from Paris, the splendour of the other cities has long since faded. Paris, however, still has a magnificent allure. Accordingly, we will need to pursue the “history of sensuality” in order to explain what historical experiences have gone into our image of Paris as the “world’s most immoral city”.

Guide secret pour étrangers et viveurs
(Secret Guide for Foreigners and Roués),
1910.
Book cover.

These historical experiences have also left their mark on the history of erotic literature and erotic art. We cannot separate this aesthetic area from the sensual one. Cultural history lives on in collector's items that can often be found in museums today.

Comments and assessments made by foreign visitors to Paris will also always be of interest to us. As travellers they will have carried Paris' reputation out into the wide world and thus helped to create the myth of Paris – in a double sense, for they have often come to the city not only as distanced visitors, but also as involved, participating observers, in search of pleasures not found at home. To this extent the reputation of an “immoral Paris” is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In allowing themselves to act out their illicit fantasies there, they could, upon their return and from the comfort of their own homes, condemn them as “licentious”, and thus restore their inner “moral harmony”.

The erotic myth of Paris has been fed by two different sources – not only the concrete developments in moral history whose main features we have attempted to outline here, but also by the fantasies which, especially from the 19th century onwards, have been projected onto Paris. This myth is an amalgam of fantasy and reality. And anyone who understands it properly will always find a certain sensuous open-mindedness in it. Paris is not a city for moralists.

The *Parisienne* – a Chimera?

Erotic postcard
*Curiosités Parisiennes –
Arc de Triomphe,*
1904.

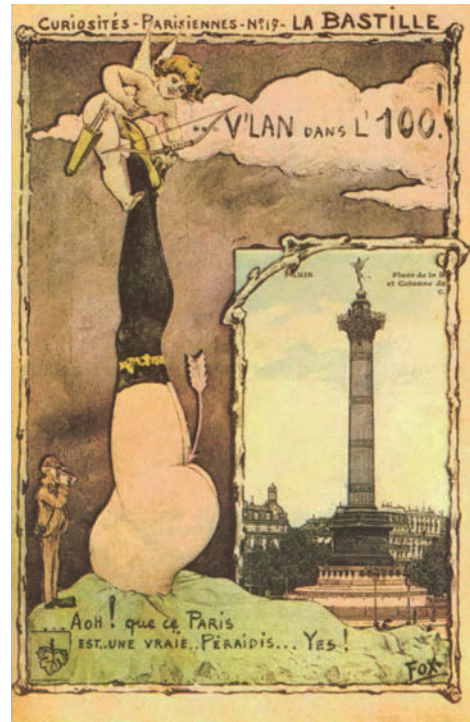
Erotic postcard
Curiosités Parisiennes,
No. 19 – La Bastille,
1904.

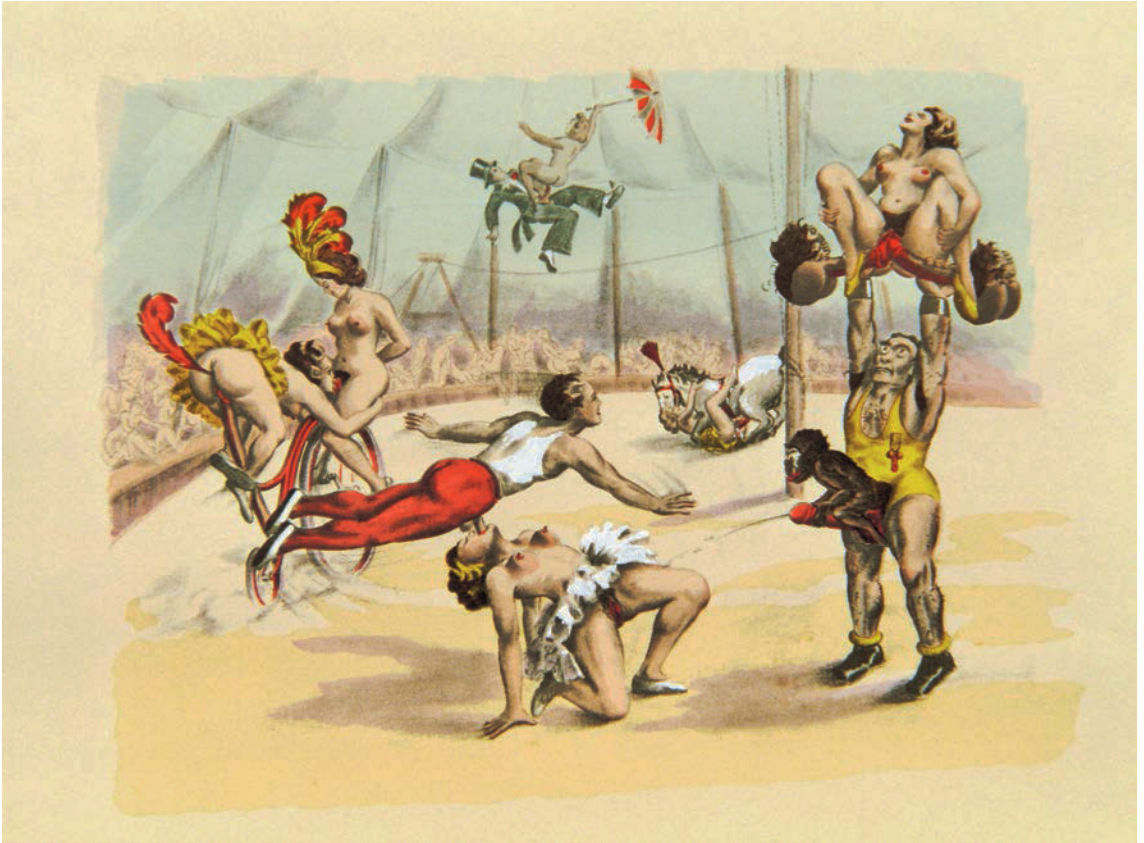
Erotic postcard
Curiosités Parisiennes,
*No. 21 – La Grande
Roue (The Ferris
Wheel),* 1904.

Erotic postcard
*Curiosités Parisiennes –
Place Vendôme,* 1904.

“The *Parisienne* [Parisian woman] is the undisputed mistress of the city – now as ever, the city owes all its allure to her. To convince yourself of this, all you need do is go to the races or the parks, to stroll along the Avenue, the Champs-Élysées, the Rue de la Paix or along the boulevards – or even wander through the working-class districts. Everywhere you go, the *Parisienne* is a feast for the eyes, and nothing is safe from her influence.... Strangers to Paris are soon in for quite a shock for the eyes, as there is little difference in the way a wealthy woman, a *petite bourgeoise*, a salaried employee, or a working-class woman dress. Whilst in every other city in the world you can almost always tell at once a passing woman's social class and income, in Paris this is extremely difficult. Even ordinary workaday women and girls look stylish and tasteful, always dressing in the latest fashion. How they manage this is their secret.”

These words open Pierre la Mazière's essay on “The *Parisienne* and her World”. But what are her characteristic qualities? What constitutes that “certain something” particular to the *Parisienne*, which accounts for her special charm? La Mazière answers the question as follows:





Coloured lithograph, c. 1940.

“A unique mixture of sensibility and subtlety, of humour and grace, of good taste and sensitivity to nuance – but first and foremost an ability to make her body, her face, her whole personality into a work of art and – like no other woman in the world – her skill in wearing only the clothes that suit her... She exudes the loveliest gift that heaven has given her – her superiority – her genius!” Her fashionable elegance is constantly mentioned.

But her attraction is not limited to fashion-consciousness. She is surrounded by an erotic flair, something often misinterpreted as frivolity or casualness. First and foremost the *Parisienne* is a work of art, an artefact created in the heads of other people who long to meet her. In her, being a woman becomes something of a fetish: “On every step of the social ladder a woman in Paris is a hundred times more a woman than in any other city in the world,” Octave Uzanne writes in his study *The Parisienne* (Dresden, 1925). Uzanne continues:

People have written more thoughts, paradoxes, aphorisms, treatises, physiologies, and books both thin and thick on the *Parisienne* than they ever have about any other woman on earth. Thanks to the *Parisienne*, for all artists and lovers, streets in Paris turn into a magical Eden of sudden desires, of lightning acts of worship, and strange adventures.... The man who has learnt how to gape long and lovingly can, at any stage of life, refresh himself just by looking, admiring, approaching, and overhearing these pretty female walkers with their lively glances and well-scrubbed faces. His enamoured spirit constantly serenades these graceful daughters of Eve, whom he may never get to know, and his senses remain pleasantly aroused long past manhood’s curfew and twilight hour.

Just as Venus emerged from the waves, so the *Parisienne* was created from the enamoured spirit of visitors to Paris. Through her, man discovers his unfulfilled desires; a revelation about what he wants. Even though he will probably never meet her, she nevertheless exists within him as a stimulating fantasy. Uzanne quotes Bonaparte: “A beautiful woman appeals to the eye, a happy one the spirit, a good one the heart.” He continues:

Say what you will, the *Parisienne* most obviously combines all three qualities. Her beauty, or – to be more exact – her grace is piquant enough to arouse love; her energetic, rarely vulgar,



Jean-Baptiste Huet, c. 1780. Sanguine engraving.



Jean-Baptiste Huet, c. 1780. Sanguine engraving.

always picturesque sense of fun is, as it were, the blossom and fragrance of our mental health; her profound, unselfish, unspoilt goodness awakens every kind of flattering devotion, all forms of heroism, all manner of sublime enslavement.

More than any other woman, the chimera of the *Parisienne* evokes an impossible trinity: she is mother, whore, and mistress in the one and same figure. A foreign writer once said of the *Parisienne*:

As a mistress she is adorable; as a spouse, frequently impossible; as a friend, perfection itself. Adorable as a mistress – it is mainly in this that her total superiority lies, for no matter what her social class, she represents the whole gamut of a woman in love. She is catlike in her use of flattery and childish ideas, as well as in her sudden acts of betrayal with the sudden unsheathing of her claws and sulking by the hearth. Her whims and wilfulness, her untameable peculiarities directed at anyone who wants only to possess her but fails to capture her heart, make her a luxury creature whom no-one but the chosen master, the conqueror, the loved-one can subjugate, dominate, and make happy at his pleasure.

Uzanne paints the portrait of a narcissistic creature who, as a fantasy figure, is simultaneously a collective product. The *Parisienne* flatters one's own narcissism. The visitor to Paris who encounters his own erotic desires and vices in this fantasy figure is threatened everywhere by his subconscious – in the form of the prostitute.

The subconscious is wide-ranging and many-sided! It so unsettles a visitor to Paris that his glance verges on the paranoid: “The secret prostitute appears all over Paris,” notes Uzanne, “it surrounds men whatever they do – in the hotel, the restaurant, shops and department stores, in bus offices, in the Louvre and Luxembourg Museums where she dons the disguise of a tourist guide. We encounter her in certain circles – even official ones – where she makes her appearance in a discreet, disguised, almost impenetrable manner... She manifests every kind of pliancy and takes advantage of any disguise, gradually letting her mask slip and – wisely – only reveals herself at the best possible moment.”

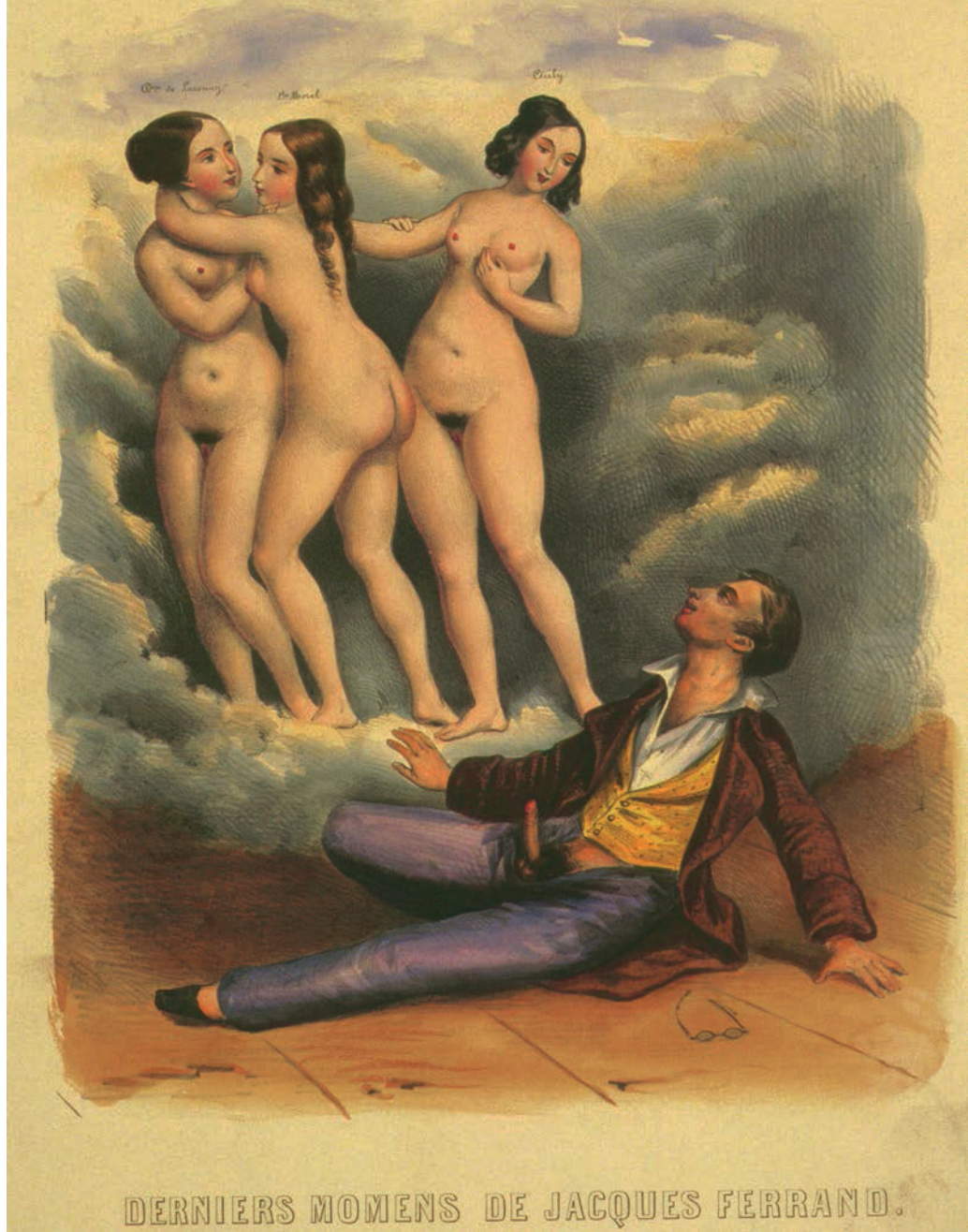
“Other secret sex-workers visit the art exhibitions, the art auctions at the Hôtel Drouot, lecture-halls, the reading rooms at Bon Marché and the Louvre,

*“Le promenade...
est'il tres amusante!”*,
from the series
Femme du monde,
1940.
Watercolour.



La promenade... est'il tres
amusante!

Mystères de Paris.



and the National Library – so familiar to those who work with their minds. In such places they sight serious men, pretending that they are themselves interested in art, sport, literature, and all intellectual pursuits. These are often the most astute – they are the most educated and can converse best.”

Not even in the Bibliothèque nationale are you safe – from your own fantasies! Needless to say, “depravity” is only ever an aspect of femaleness, upon which male lust is then projected.

Subconsciously Uzanne uses a special metaphor, which reveals how strongly a male glance at a *Parisienne* is affected by fantasies of prostitution. He describes women as “living coins”. It is in fact coins that determine sexual transactions.

Alongside this image of women as a venal “work of art”, however, stands the “artifice” of prostitutes. Metamorphosis and disillusion complement each other: “The prostitute is a child of misery and vice. Her distinguishing mark is artificiality.” For Uzanne, does the “common prostitute” not project merely a negative image of all the qualities he praises in the *Parisienne*? “She (the common prostitute) wears an apron, fills in her wrinkles with brick-dust, blackens her eyebrows with a burnt matchstick, and sleeks back her greying hair with jasmine or pomade of roses, at two *sous* [pennies] a box.”

The visitor to Paris awakens from his dream of an erotic Eldorado with crass realism. Intoxication is followed by a sober disenchantment: “The [prostitutes’] main stamping ground is the boulevard. In the cafés to which they have access, they have a better chance of meeting a prosperous gentleman – even if it were only a foreigner of the type who frequent these places because they have a worldwide reputation for sensual opportunities. Furthermore, this reputation is remarkably proper and artificial. Nothing is more monotonous than whoredom; the so-called “pleasure establishments” of Paris bear a fatal similarity to those of all other European metropolises – they are in no respect more fun. Prostitutes everywhere are stupid, mercenary, as bored as they are boring; only when they are drunk will they do anything debauched, and then their sense of fun is even sadder and more depressing than their usual apathy. You’ve got to be quite an optimist to derive any pleasure from following how they move, or what they say and do. A prostitute is a cowed, often starving beast – and she practises a ghastly trade.”

In this way, our image of the *Parisienne* fluctuates between a transfigured image of a potential mistress always ready for passion and the disenchanting picture of a depraved whore. The two are as closely linked as fantasies are to the real world.

Mystères de Paris
(Mysteries of Paris),
c. 1850.
Lithograph.



Roberty, c. 1890. Watercolour.



Roberty, c. 1890. Watercolour.

The *Parisienne* is a phantasm who colours the whole city: Paris itself becomes a female city – desired and disparaged both at once. The fact that this city was able to establish itself throughout Europe and the whole world as being the focus of erotic desires has its reasons in the city's historical foundations.

Paris could only grow into a topos of erotic fantasy by combining these two developments. By the end of the Middle Ages, Paris was already a city with “metropolitan” forms of life, meaning that a lot of what was later called “Parisian” was in fact simply metropolitan. Moreover, Paris was heavily influenced by a royal Court whose way of life was determined by a dissipated and dissolute life of luxury, and which set an example of licentious morals that invited emulation. The 18th century, in particular, which was also the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution, was largely responsible for the freedom of morals. These historical experiences continue to this very day in our collective subconscious – and also have an effect on the image Paris still enjoys abroad.

During these years, a kind of public began to develop who removed “love” – itself a relatively recent historical phenomenon – from the sphere of private life and made it a social plaything. The Goncourt brothers provide a relevant description of a typical French woman of this period:

The 18th century French woman has an original quality about her. Her face changes expression under different regimes. But although her features might be noble under Louis XIV, witty under Louis XV, movingly simple under Louis XVI, her world always remains a stage. The public is constantly upon her, and in the end she performs her play so naturally that she appears artificial when she happens to want to be truthful. Her role in life is hard to play; for this reason a woman must start learning in good time. No matter how far she gets in life, appearance is the key.

On this stage, witty coquetry could be seen. Flirting and wit intertwine and turn love into a social art. This may well have irritated many visitors to Paris – especially German ones.

Gutzkow acknowledges what nowadays we would call the “emancipatory element” of “French love”. The element of “economising” or “budgeting” in love gives the latter a quality of deliberation and reflection. That said, Gutzkow takes refuge once again in a quasi-Wagnerian tone, full of German soul, dominated by profound emotional devotion.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Moulin-Rouge*, 1891.
Coloured lithograph,
170 x 124 cm.
Victoria and Albert
Museum, London.