

Robert Doisneau's *La Dame Indignée*: Modernity in the Fourth Republic

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A woman stops and turns towards the window of a gallery, mouth agape as she gazes upon a painting of a nude woman provocatively presenting her backside to the viewer. The main figure of Robert Doisneau's *La Dame Indignée* (Figure 1) is a middle-aged, dark-haired woman, fighting off the chilly weather with her thick coat, scarf, and hat. She completely faces the display window and stands with her feet firmly planted in the ground; her posture and direction indicate that her attention is entirely devoted to further examining the controversial painting. Behind her, another woman, walking just quickly enough for her image to blur, spares a glance in the store window's direction, perhaps in an attempt to discover the source of the other woman's comically dramatic expression. The visual elements combine with the historical background of Doisneau's *La Dame Indignée* to group it with a category of photography known as humanistic reportage. In that vein the image promotes the rights of the working class, the photographer as a twentieth-century Baudelairean flâneur, and the shifting role of women in society. Representing this variety of themes, *La Dame Indignée* acts as an icon of French modernity in the Fourth Republic.

La Dame Indignée and Historical Context

Born in the suburbs of Paris in 1912 to a petit-bourgeois family involved in the plumbing business, Robert Doisneau survived two great world wars and empathized with the lower classes throughout the

entirety of his life.¹ Doisneau began his career in the arts as a lithographer-engraver and lettering artist and did not move into photography until he found a position at the advertising firm Atelier Ullmann.² From that point he turned solely to photography as a profession, gaining greater technical skills and aesthetic judgments as he continued working in advertisement. During World War II and the German occupation of France, Doisneau exercised his dream of becoming a reportage photographer by capturing images of skirmishes and small uprisings by the Resistance.³ Throughout the war, he also produced postcards and portraits to support himself financially.⁴ The culture of France, documented through the magazines of the time, was forever changed as the Liberation brought to power the Fourth Republic and the age of mass media.

After the war, Doisneau met two journalists, Robert Giraud and Robert Miquel, nicknamed Romi. Giraud, “fascinated by the ‘world of *la cloche* (the vagrant) and the night,” frequently explored the streets of Paris.⁵ Doisneau, a lifelong devotee to his hometown and its surroundings, took advantage of his friendship with Giraud to become better acquainted with the city from which he had always felt his suburban childhood estranged him.⁶ Romi owned an antique shop specializing in *objets d’art* on the rue de Seine in Paris. In 1948, he installed a painting by a nineteenth century artist named Wagner in the window of his gallery; it features the unclothed backside of a voluptuous woman, wearing only stockings and shoes, as she bends seductively over a table in an ornate dressing room. Set in a gilded frame, the image drew much attention from passersby on the public street, leading Doisneau to see the potential for a photo series of people’s reactions.⁷ Setting up his Rolleiflex behind the reflective glass of Romi’s shop, he managed to capture a collection of comical images entitled *Les Regards Obliques* – The Oblique Looks – that he described as “*comique terrestre*,” or “down to earth humor.”⁸ *La Dame Indignée*, translated as “The Indignant Lady,” is one of the photographs in the series and a prime example of the type of humor that was so enticing for Doisneau.

¹ Peter Hamilton, *Robert Doisneau: Retrospective* (London: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 16.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵ Hamilton, *Robert Doisneau: A Photographer’s Life* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 186.

⁶ Robert Doisneau, *Three Seconds Form Eternity: Photographs* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1980).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

La Dame Indignée and Humanistic Reportage

Doisneau initially published *Regards* in the French weekly *Point de Vue*, a magazine that contained “amusing anecdotes on everyday life,” but as the popularity of the series grew, other periodicals throughout Europe and the United States began printing the photographs as well.⁹ Magazines such as *LIFE*, *Lilliput*, *Picture Post*, and *Point de Vue* flourished in the postwar atmosphere as they circulated such depictions of human emotion and capitalized on the international interest in the “photo-novel.”¹⁰ The candidness and explicit humor of *La Dame Indignée* appeal to a wide variety of audiences, regardless of cultural heritage. The woman’s shock is apparent through her bulging eyes, pursed mouth, and slightly hunched shoulders, and the nude’s provocative position is clearly indicative of a highly sexualized atmosphere in both the “real” space of the street and the virtual space of the painting. The physical cues are easily recognizable to a wide range of audiences and can be understood without the aid of language or context.

Although *La Dame Indignée* shares many traits with foreign images of similar comedic value, certain elements of the photograph align it with the specifically French approach to humanism in the decade following the Second World War. Throughout the Occupation, the population of France was in large part starved of information about the rest of the world; the Liberation opened the country to a flood of new images from the media showing the impact of the devastating global conflict.¹¹ Although the war was over, France had yet to recover from the material and psychological devastation of the Occupation. Rations were strictly enforced due to food shortages, and the country was still reeling from the tremendous loss of life.¹² Purges against those who had sympathized with or supported the German occupation were also violent and severe.¹³ In this tension-filled setting, French photographers sought to document natural expressions and ordinary people through a genre called humanistic reportage, or *la photographie humaniste*; they wanted to capture the essence of the human spirit and show that the resilience of the

⁹ Ibid., 186.

¹⁰ Ibid., 187.

¹¹ Peter Hamilton, “Representing the Social: France and Frenchness in Post-War Humanist Photography,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 92.

¹² France lost nearly one and a half million people by the time of the Liberation, with 600,000 from military and civilian deaths and the rest from a combination of emigration and a drastic decline in birth rates. Ibid., 89.

¹³ Ibid., 92.

French people could overcome the destruction and despair of war. With *La Dame Indignée*, Doisneau is intentionally isolating the woman's face, creating an intense sharpness that is the result of his careful adjustments to the camera's aperture and focus. Behind her the *teinturerie*, or the dry cleaner's, stands as further proof that day-to-day life has resumed.

In the years before the war, photography as a professional field was centered on journalism and advertisement.¹⁴ Afterwards, photographers were backed by new photo agencies, such as Raymond Grosset's RAPHO, which were dedicated for the first time to marketing humanistic images, and they carried their cameras out into the streets.¹⁵ Doisneau and his fellow French photographers, including Henri Cartier-Bresson, worked for such agencies to preserve the nuances of Paris on film. With its broad sidewalk designed for pedestrian traffic, the rue de Seine, the street pictured in *La Dame Indignée*, is just visible through the glass window in the spaces between the female figures. It was the ideal setting for finding scenes of Left Bank culture; Romi's shop was situated only doors away from several bars and bistros that were popular among the working class.¹⁶ Alongside Romi and Giraud, Doisneau explored the neighborhood, finding inspiration to create his many photo series. In a letter to friend and biographer Peter Hamilton, Doisneau describes the fundamental philosophy of his career: "In those ordinary surroundings which were my own, I happened to glimpse some fragments of time where the everyday world appeared to be freed of its ugliness. To show such moments could take a whole lifetime."¹⁷

La Dame Indignée and the Working Class

The growing trend in humanist photography was closely tied with the political environment of France in the years of the Fourth Republic. During the war, Doisneau used his knowledge and experience with graphic art and photography to forge documents for Resistance fighters. After the Liberation, communists and socialists influenced the formation of the new government of the Fourth Republic, calling out for the elimination of class divisions and for the solidification of workers' rights. Contemporaneous with *La Dame Indignée*, major workers' strikes took place in 1947 and 1948, bringing the labor movement to the forefront of French politics and ingraining it into the country's national

¹⁴ Douglas Smith, "Funny Face Humanism in Post-War French Photography and Philosophy," *French Cultural Studies* 16 (2005): 44.

¹⁵ Hamilton, "Representing the Social," 98.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *Robert Doisneau: A Photographer's Life*, 186.

¹⁷ Peter Hamilton, *Robert Doisneau: Retrospective* (London: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 8.

identity.¹⁸ Doisneau was also closely associated with existentialist philosophers and avant-garde artists; his portraits from the post-war period include Sartre, Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Picasso.¹⁹ Sartre, in particular, viewed existentialism as a humanist philosophy and encouraged individuals towards political activism, stating that in a world rapidly losing faith in religion and government, civilization depended on humans to take responsibility for their actions and to direct the fate of society.²⁰ In the same year that Doisneau captured *Les Regards Obliques*, Sartre published *Visages*, contrasting the representation of faces in paintings with those in real life; he criticized the masking of flaws and idealization of expressions in painting and called for a “return to the values of dignity, equality and tolerance.”²¹ Sartre calls for more portrayals of authentic human emotion in art, and the frankness and spontaneity of the woman’s reaction in *La Dame Indignée* exemplify his ideas of the strength of the individual.

Along with several of his close friends, Doisneau was a member of the PCF from 1945 to 1947, but he chose to leave the group when he found his independent character ill-suited to the highly disciplined agendas of the party. Regardless of his official affiliations, Doisneau always identified himself with the working class population of Paris and its suburbs. Drawing on the memories of his modest petit-bourgeois origins, he saw himself as a representative of the people who would have been walking along the rue de Seine during his *Regards* photo series: “I look like them, I speak their language, I share their conversation, I eat like them. I am completely integrated into that milieu.”²² In *La Dame Indignée*, he focuses on the residents of St.-Germain-des-Près, a neighborhood filled with a spectrum of people, ranging from vagrants and gypsies to intellectuals and artists.²³ The beret that the woman wears is a “classic signifier either of the *classe populaire* or of the peasantry,” and the plainness of her coat contrasts the clothing of a wealthier bourgeois couple in another image from the series.²⁴ She epitomizes the social class that Doisneau seeks out with his photography, the ordinary woman taking a pause in her everyday life to look into the window of an antique shop along her route.

¹⁸ Hamilton, “Representing the Social,” 90.

¹⁹ Hamilton, *Robert Doisneau: A Photographer's Life*, 183.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University, 2007).

²¹ Smith, “Funny Face,” 44.

²² Hamilton, *Robert Doisneau: Retrospective*, 34.

²³ Hamilton, *Robert Doisneau: A Photographer's Life*, 186.

²⁴ Hamilton, “Representing the Social,” 100.

Doisneau was not alone in his self-identification with the working class; many of his fellow photographers felt that they shared similarities with the laborers because of the mechanical nature of their artistic medium. They began their professional careers in a time when photography was looked down on, when the separation between photographers and other creators of “high art,” such as painting and sculpture, paralleled the division between the lower classes and the wealthy elite. “My younger colleagues cannot imagine with what distaste those who declared their interest in photography were viewed,” Doisneau writes, “to be frank about such a thing was considered a sort of obscenity.”²⁵ The perception of photography as a form of pure documentation tipped it towards science rather than art, especially given its previous use in the news, advertisements, and portraits. The construction of the image involved not brushstrokes or chisels but the turning of knobs and dials; nevertheless, photographers found ways to incorporate themselves into their work. Throughout the *Regards* series, Doisneau’s own presence mirrors that of both the onlooker and the antique artwork. He takes on the persona of the laborer because he is at work behind his camera lens, and that very work allows him to view his subjects just as they are viewing the painting. At the same time, he stands behind a window in the display of a store, and for anyone able to see past the reflective surface of the glass, he becomes exposed to their gaze. He acts as both spectator and spectacle.

La Dame Indignée and Time

The origins of artist as spectator of ordinary life lie with nineteenth century poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire and his writings on the Parisian flâneur. In his essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” he describes the flâneur-artist as both a component and an observer of the crowd, a man who finds joy in immortalizing his surroundings by capturing images of the transient. For Baudelaire, modernity is “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”²⁶ His writing inspired such artists as Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas to seek their subjects in the streets of Paris rather than in the imagined world commonly found in history and narrative painting. Doisneau and the humanist photographers discovered this same passion for snapshots in the public sphere. They played the part of photography’s impressionists, the twentieth-century flâneurs who roamed through the crowded *rues* in search of moments of modernity.

²⁵ Hamilton, *Robert Doisneau: Retrospective*, 8.

²⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964), 13.

Doisneau's friend Robert Giraud emulates Baudelaire's writings through his fascination with Paris at night; however, instead of analyzing the dangers of the female presence as nineteenth century writers did, he looks to the vagrant wandering through the darkness or to the stranger stopping by for a short break. "Usually he'd be lying in wait, propped up on a bar counter somewhere, for hours at a time. And someone would turn up – there was always a nocturnal down-and-out who'd come and share a drink with him."²⁷ In this sense, Doisneau's street photography, which is so interrelated with Giraud's explorations, becomes split by the duality of harking back to a nineteenth century method of spectatorship through the technology of the camera in an advancing world. As film grows more sensitive to light, photographers are able to take more pictures in a shorter span of time. Baudelaire writes, "In trivial life, in the daily metamorphosis of external things, there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist."²⁸ In order to capture simultaneously the blur of movement and the clarity of the woman's indignation in *La Dame Indignée*, Doisneau perfectly calculates his shutter speed to expose the film for just the right duration and succeeds in recording a sliver of modern life using a modern technique.

With candid photography, the artist has less control over the content than an impressionist painter, who grounds the setting in the contemporary world but ultimately presents a biased perspective. Doisneau carefully planned the composition of *La Dame Indignée* to include all three female figures at the same time and to focus on the face of the main woman and the painting she observes; the oblique angles give the audience the voyeuristic illusion of intruding on a private moment. The immediacy of photography, both visually and temporally, gives the subjects a tangible property that is absent from those in other forms of art. Walter Benjamin, an influential early twentieth-century philosopher and essayist who published critiques of Baudelaire's writing, explains in his "Little History of Photography:" "[Photography] can give the presentation a magical value that a painted picture can never again possess . . . that spark has, as it were, burned through the person in the image with reality, finding the indiscernible place in the condition of that long past minute where the future is nesting."²⁹ The de-contextualization of the scene creates an uncertainty for the viewer and stirs up the desire to learn more about the material and temporal surroundings. In *La Dame*

²⁷ Robert Doisneau, *Three Seconds Form Eternity: Photographs* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1980).

²⁸ Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 4.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Connecticut: Leete's Island Books, Inc., 1980), 202.

Indignée, several questions can be raised: Why is the woman in the back in such a hurry? What art objects are facing the window but presenting only their backs to the camera lens? What building adjacent to the *teinturerie* does “Lefra...” refer to in the upper right corner of the photograph? Doisneau purposely leaves these mysteries unresolved in order to spark the viewer’s curiosity and draw the viewer further into the world he captures. In his book *Three Seconds Form Eternity*, he describes an analogy that further builds upon the philosophies of Baudelaire and Benjamin: “For a long time I thought you had to concentrate all your efforts on slicing time into thinner and thinner slices, as though it were a joint of ham. But this gives disappointing results – if the slice isn’t interlarded with a little bit of past and a tiny sliver of the future, all that’s left on your wafe-thin slice is a mere gesture, totally without flavor.”³⁰ Time is hence not a fragmented whole but an unbroken continuum; a photograph preserves both the instantaneous and the eternal.

***La Dame Indignée* and Femininity**

In addition to depicting changing attitudes towards politics, class divisions, and art, humanist photography in post-war France also shaped the evolution of women’s roles in society. Of the entire *Les Regards Obliques* series, *La Dame Indignée* contains the most feminized space with a total of three female figures, both real and illustrated. The main subject in the photograph is the woman staring into a shop whose items she would not necessarily have been able to afford. The painting hanging on the wall, the focus of the woman’s wide-eyed stare, depicts a pornographic nineteenth century image of a nude. Her raised arm signifies that she could be applying powder to her face as she stares into a mirror, or it can imply that she is trying to peek through a crack in the door to spy on a neighboring event or conversation. Her head is pressed against the wall, limiting her to a faceless body purely designed for viewing pleasure; her individuality is disregarded. Expression and emotion are integral parts of humanity, and without them, the body simply becomes a fetishized instrument. She directly contrasts the live woman, who is nearly entirely covered in the heavy black cloth of her coat, scarf, and hat. The only visible skin she shows is her face, which conveys the entirely human reaction of shock and offense; she is the woman caught off guard and without pretense, without the shy, blushing, tearful conventions of femininity.³¹ The third woman is a ghostly character; like her fellow bystander, she is covered in a heavy dark coat

³⁰ Doisneau, *Three Seconds*.

³¹ Susan Weiner, “Two Modernities: from *Elle* to *Mademoiselle*. Women’s Magazines in Postwar France,” *Contemporary European History* 8 (1999), 401.

with her face as the only visible skin. Despite the blurring of her figure, she is more humanized than the painted model because of her distinguishable features. Together, the three women, each presented with different degrees of humanity, form a trinity of contradictions: clothed and unclothed, movement and stability, interior and exterior.

The woman in focus in *La Dame Indignée* is the most independent; she stands alone and looks openly at the nude. Her expression, although shocked and scandalized, also appears to be fascinated by the blatant display of sexuality before her. During the world wars, women in France filled the jobs left behind by the men who had gone off to fight at the warfront; the masculinization of their female duties, or alternatively the feminization of traditionally male positions, created a blending of gender identities. In Baudelaire's France, the spectator is always male, and the female is simply "a kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching, who holds wills and destinies suspended on her glance."³² In the modernized Fourth Republic, with women's suffrage fully granted in the new constitution of 1946, women finally stepped out of the boundaries that had carried over from the Napoleonic Code, which confined them to remain submissive to their husbands.³³ Although the reflection of the woman in the photograph is invisible to the reader, she most likely saw her own image mirrored in the glass before the painting, allowing her to compare her appearance with that of the painted nude. Through the female liberation and the transitioning gender identity, she has the freedom to view the painting, like Doisneau himself, from the position of both spectator and spectacle, voyeur and fetishized object.

Even with the success of the feminist movement, the female body remained an object of commodity in the Fourth Republic. The painting of the nude in *La Dame Indignée* was an object ready to be sold by Romi, just as Doisneau's photograph was to be published in *Point de Vue*. The connections between women and capitalism were not purely marketed toward a male audience; women served as popular models for household items, including washing machines and kitchen appliances, in female-oriented magazines such as *Elle*.³⁴ Photo series in other periodicals, including *Point de Vue*, were gaining female readership because of their exposure to the world of the public and the foreign. A circuit of gaze is formed in *La Dame Indignée* by the woman walking past as she looks at the main woman in focus, who is in turn looking at the painted nude on the wall, whose interest is turned to an unknown scene behind the wall. This circuit is lengthened even further by the addition of

³² Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 30.

³³ Weiner, "Two Modernities," 396.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 400.

the artist himself and the publication of the photograph for thousands of eyes across the world to see.

The decades separating the end of the Impressionist movement and the rise in humanist photography witnessed a tremendous transformation in the acceptance of women in the public sphere. The Second World War gave women the opportunity to move out of the domestic interior into the exterior professional realm, but with severe shortages during the Liberation and the return of the men, women were once again confined to caretakers of the home.³⁵ Nevertheless, the image of the independent woman in various roles, including wife, mother, citizen, homemaker, and professional proliferated throughout the media. Women no longer needed to walk around chaperoned under the threat of associations with prostitution and debauchery. The two women outside the window in *La Dame Indignée* are comfortable with their public exposure, yet each is still encased in her own private space. The vertical patterning of dark and light heightens the separation between the two figures as well as their distance and removal from the painting. Contrasting the idealized female figure standing bare and available to the viewer with the much more conservatively clothed female figures parading down the rue de Seine shows the rise of the modern woman and the development of her image, from object derived purely for male pleasure to multidimensional subject worthy of contemplation and respect.

***La Dame Indignée* and Modernity in the Fourth Republic**

Doisneau and his fellow humanist photographers redefined Baudelaire's concept of modernity and adapted it to fit the political, social, and artistic atmosphere of postwar France. *La Dame Indignée* and the *Les Regards Obliques* series have had a lasting impact on the world and on the artist's prolific career. Today, copies of the photograph remain in the collections of museums and private owners, contributing to the study of art, history, philosophy, psychology, gender relations, and many other subjects; it is both universal and the embodiment of modern French culture. The Fourth Republic, although lasting only twelve short years, was an essential period of transition in French history, with the humanist philosophies' attempt to repair the damage inflicted by the travesties of war, the working class's rise to political power, and the feminist movement's shifting stances. *La Dame Indignée* encompasses all of these elements of modernity in the French Fourth Republic and radiates *l'esprit du temps*, the spirit of the times.

³⁵ Weiner, "Two Modernities," 399.



Figure 1 Robert Doisneau, *La Dame Indignée*, 1948 (negative), 1979 (print). Gelatin silver print, 9 1/16 x 12 in. Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, NY. Gift of Mr. Frederick J. Myerson

Photography courtesy of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University.

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