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University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.

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University of Nebraska-Lincoln, U.S.A.

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Perspectives in Time: Using the Arts to Teach Proust and His World

Janet Moser

Brooklyn College, City University of New York, U.S.A.

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Abstract

Arts resources available on the Internet and DVDs provide a flexible, richly resonant, student-friendly framework for a coordinated study of the connections between the style and structure of Proust's novel and the social and cultural worlds he depicts. *In Search of Lost Time*, a product of an artistic revolution as well as a critical and historical contemplation of the question of how this revolution came about, looks back towards the arts of previous generations, compelling its readers to adopt a multitude of approaches in order to move forward into the Proustian world. A deeper, more intimate understanding of the world of the *Search* can be achieved in any classroom anywhere by integrating carefully selected electronic resources for film, architecture, painting, music, costume, decor and dance with the teaching of the written text. In particular, perspective in contemporary painting as a model for Proust's innovations in narrative plays an important role in this study.

Introduction

Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, a product of an artistic revolution as well as a critical and historical contemplation of the question of how this revolution came about, looks back towards the arts of previous generations, compelling its readers to adopt a multitude of approaches in order to move forward into the Proustian world. Proust himself encourages his readers to develop "other eyes," new angles of vision that multiply the perspectives through which they view any subject, to "see the universe through the eyes...of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them see, that each of them is" (Proust, 2003, V, p. 343). And it is precisely Proust's invitation to explore the society of his novel using multiple lenses, ways of seeing that can accommodate a broader spectrum of our students' learning styles—not only linguistic, but visual, auditory, spatial, to name a few—that allows us to bring the power of the Internet and multimedia technology so effectively to bear on our search for Proust and the lost time of his world.

Multiple Perspectives

Along with the increasingly diverse student population in higher education comes the need for a more inclusive pedagogy. Much of the literature calling for varied teaching approaches to accommodate the differences that contemporary students bring to the classroom focuses on questions of multiple intelligences and learning styles. In his 1983 *Frames of Mind*, Howard Gardner identified seven distinct intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal. In 1999, in *Intelligence Reframed*, he added an eighth intelligence, naturalistic. The research on multiple intelligences has been complemented by scholarship investigating the field of learning styles. Frequently cited models, like those of Kolb (1984) and Dunn and Dunn (1993), assess and identify learning style as "the way individuals begin to concentrate on, process, internalize, and retain new and difficult information" (Dunn, Honigsfeld, & Doolan, 2009, p.136), and call for teachers to be attentive to the stimuli that influence student learning and to the wide range of individual student strengths when formulating assignments and assessments.

The scope of this paper does not allow for an extended review of the literature on multiple intelligences and learning styles, of the background in learning theory, or an accounting of the varieties of instructional approaches that these theories suggest (see, for example, Dunn et al., 2009; Denig, 2004; Lincoln & Rademacher, 2006; Kezar 2001; Barrington 2004). For the purposes of this study of using the arts to teach Proust, the importance of these theories lies in their uniform recognition of the differences among our students, and in their shared call for a pedagogy that consciously addresses those differences. Proust, too, is the explicator of a learning model that embraces a diversity of

perspectives; his *Bildungsroman* is quite consciously and deliberately embedded in the revolutionary theories of perception emerging at the time in arts criticism and the cognitive sciences. It would seem natural then to allow Proust himself be our principal guide to constructing an understanding of his novel out of our own personal ways of looking at the world.

Educators at pre-university levels have long been familiar with theories of multiple intelligences and learning style, as attested in the wealth of scholarship describing efforts to infuse the primary and secondary school curricula with approaches, assignments and assessment measures in support of these theories; however, university instructors have been slow to take practical notice of these developments. Ernie Barrington (2004) claims that “learning in tertiary institutions is often conservative and teacher-centered, and privileges certain kinds of abilities over others. It is not surprising that in this context MI (multiple intelligences) has failed to gain much interest” (p. 432).

There have, however, been some studies in the use of these methodologies in college literature courses both as an approach to interdisciplinary learning and as a means of motivating and amplifying traditional literary study. In her article “Teaching in Color: Multiple Intelligences in the Literature Classroom,” Helen Sword (2007), like Barrington, asserts that “university professors have always been notoriously reluctant to submit to pedagogical self-examination of any kind or to consider substantial shifts in teaching methodology” (p.227). She tells of freeing her literature students from “a black-and-white universe, a world composed entirely of words” by “opening [her] classroom to the visual arts, to music, to dance,” (p. 223) diversifying a poetry course by creating assignments that appealed to students’ visual, verbal, spatial, logical and kinesthetic aptitudes. Far from supplanting the fundamental role accorded linguistic intelligence in literature courses, multiple intelligences pedagogy acts, according to Sword (2007), as “an educational heuristic that offers teachers useful prompts for encouraging intellectual diversity” (p. 247). Similarly, Virginia Pompei Jones describes her efforts to incorporate art and culture in a literature course as recognition of “the importance of diversification and multiple intelligences in arousing students’ interest and in enhancing the learning process” (p. 270). These innovative attempts to open the literature course to a plurality of intelligences and learning styles welcome students of all abilities as active participants in the reading and writing about literature.

While scholars have recognized the value of extra-literary approaches in the teaching of Proust’s novel (see Dezon-Jones & Wimmers, 2003), these efforts have generally been oriented towards complementing and elucidating the text through one particular lens (painting, music, social history) rather than examining the interaction between the text and the world it purports to describe. The teaching of a novel like Proust’s, a work deeply

engaged with the culture and art of its times, provides a unique opportunity to attempt an integrated cross-disciplinary study of a literary work using a broad range of related multi-sensory multimedia resources that can appeal to a wide spectrum of student aptitudes—a course that recognizes that “the mind is neither singular nor revealed in a single language of representation” (Veneema & Gardner, 1996, p. 73).

The Novel and its Times

Proust’s novel provides a flexible and richly resonant organizing framework for any comprehensive study of the belle époque. Proust’s fictional *Search* for the lost time of his own generation, at once a work of literature and of social history, a fictional text that responds to the scholarly, non-fiction writing of its time, a critical survey of the ways in which art, music, dance, architecture, furniture, and dress functioned and malfunctioned in French society, a meditation on the new social configurations and an essay in the new artistic forms that would emerge from the upheaval of the Great War, can be made to serve literally as a “guide to the sensibilities, manners, tastes and fashion” of the Paris of his time (Bowie, 1998, p.73).

Perhaps it may be said that Society and the Arts met more intimately in the salons of belle époque Paris than they had ever met before or would ever meet again. The unique and intimate conjunction of social mobility and cultural change at the end of this era provides the narrative framework of Proust’s novel. The dramatic action of the novel, the Narrator’s endeavor to recover his past in order to make himself whole, is situated in a world that has lost its familiar sense of community. New faces now sponsor new forms in the arts, yet the measure of one’s culture remains the measure of one’s social authority. With family, friends, and acquaintances either dead or transfigured by the new age, the Narrator deliberately removes himself from the world. The narrative movement, the hero’s attempt to achieve his vocation, to find his place in society as an artist, takes the form of a solitary quest to regain, through aesthetic memory, the lost time of his youth. For him and for his readers, the things of the present will elicit the remembrance of worlds past.

The reader familiar with the nineteenth-century revival of interest in the architecture of the Gothic cathedral; with the paintings of Giotto, Botticelli, Vermeer, Monet; with the music of Beethoven, Wagner, Fauré, Debussy; with the collaborations of the impresario Diaghilev with Stravinsky, Fokine, Nijinsky, Cocteau, Bakst, Benois, Picasso for the Ballets Russes; with the couture of Fortuny and Poiret; with what it might have meant to inherit a Boulle cabinet or a chair upholstered in Beauvais tapestry understands something about how the society portrayed in Proust’s novel really worked. But for some modern readers, and surely for most readers in an undergraduate comparative literature course, many of Proust’s cultural touchstones remain fragmentary, marginal, outmoded,

or worse, meaningless. A deeper, more intimate understanding of the world of this important novel, a work and a world intricately structured by the interactions of character and culture, can be achieved in any classroom anywhere by integrating multi-sensory material, the abundant and varied resources for film, architecture, art, music, costume, decor and dance available on the internet, with the teaching of the written text.

Proust's writing, richly-textured with metaphor and allusion, aptly provides an updated example for the new Impressionist age of his countryman Pascal's seventeenth-century dictum that prose should be "the painting of thought" (1995, p. 26). In the course I teach on the modern European novel at Brooklyn College, *Swann's Way*, the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, serves as a challenging introduction to both twentieth-century European culture and its literature. This course, an undergraduate elective, usually attracts a mix of students from a range of majors that reflects the diversity of this urban institution. Typically, students specializing in English, comparative literature, history, philosophy, art history, music, theater and the social sciences enroll in the course. I start the semester with an overview of the character of the years covered by Proust's novel, emphasizing a distinction between the belle époque, a term that, when applied by general historians, has come to refer to the relatively stable and coherent period of social history from the end of the Franco-Prussian war in the 1870s to the years preceding World War I; and the fin de siècle, a cultural historical term that connotes the contemporary sense of artistic decadence and corresponding moral decline that arose in the years around 1900.¹ These were times of rapid and dramatic change. Charles Peguy (1961), looking back at recent history on the eve of World War I, writes that the world "has changed less since Jesus Christ than it has changed in the last thirty years" (p. 1104). It is not the accuracy of Peguy's statement that is of particular interest, but rather the study of the period "in the way it reflects the nineteenth century to which it belongs; the way it announces the twentieth century already taking shape; the continuities it affirms in the midst of change; the changes it experiences amid persistent continuity" (Weber, 1986, p. 235). And Proust's expansive novel, looking back to the thirty years before the turn of the century and moving forward through the years of World War I, neatly encompasses both the new era of high-end social mobility and the closely corresponding movements of revival and innovation in art, music, dance, dress, and technology that helped shape the world of the early twentieth century and the worldview of its citizens.

The times of Proust's own life furnish the material for his work, and we start our literary study of Proust's text by looking at the social structures that characterize the years before and after 1900, the lingering authority of the aristocracy and their interactions with the increasingly numerous and powerful upper bourgeoisie in Parisian society. The salons of the *Search*, those of the traditionally-minded aristocracy (the Guermantes), and those of the avant-garde arrivistes, (the Verdurins), determine and affirm the social status of their

adherents, serving as microcosms for the study of the role played by culture in the rise of the new classes. It is at Mme Verdurin's that Proust first introduces us to Vinteuil's music, Elstir's paintings, and the newest fashions in dance and music with discussions of Diaghilev, Nijinsky, the Ballets Russes, and Stravinsky.

As the authority of aristocratic Paris yields to that of the rising bourgeoisie, the once predominant salon of the Guermantes is eclipsed by that of Mme Verdurin and her disciples; and in the final volume of the *Search*, the climactic relinquishing of the aristocratic hold on Parisian society is epitomized in the marriage of Mme Verdurin to the Prince de Guermantes. The seemingly impassable barriers of the Narrator's remembered youth have been transgressed, for

enfeebled or broken, the springs of the machine could no longer perform their task of keeping out the crowd; a thousand alien elements made their way in and all homogeneity, all consistency of form and colour was lost. The Faubourg Saint-Germain was like some senile dowager now, who replies only with timid smiles to the insolent servants who invade her drawing-rooms, drink her orangeade, present their mistresses to her. (Proust, 2003, VI, p. 390)

The social and cultural ramifications of this paradigm shift are witnessed throughout the novel as Mme Verdurin's salon and the new people and arts she champions overshadow both Swann's way and the way of the Guermantes.

We look at Paris in photographs, paintings and film to give students a visual context in which to situate the culture and society of the novel and its imagery. The cityscape of the new nineteenth-century Paris and its underlying tensions were principal subjects of the new visual arts. Viewing Eugène Atget's photos of daily Parisian life, [*Magasin, avenue des Gobelins*](#) and [*Café, Avenue de la Grande-Armée*](#), Monet's [*Boulevard des Capucines*](#), Renoir's [*Grands Boulevards*](#), Caillebotte's [*Paris, Rainy Day*](#), Pissarro's [*Boulevard Montmartre at night*](#) places students in contact with the visual record of the details of urban life and with lively depictions of the grand boulevards and monumental architecture that dramatically altered the physical and imaginative landscape of the city.

We watch scenes from Vincente Minnelli's 1958 film *Gigi*, set in turn-of-the-century Paris, giving special attention to Cecil Beaton's costumes and production designs. This movie provides students with an amusing and complementary way of looking at the same Parisian society that populates much of Proust's novel, a society whose impending disruptions will be tracked throughout much of the *Search*. This visual introduction to the city of Paris and its inhabitants, its streets, parks, public monuments, restaurants,

furniture, dress, food, and social customs gives students an additional lens through which to view the Proustian world.

We discuss briefly how artistic culture in France interacted with the technological innovations of the belle époque. The new cast-iron architecture, electric lighting, and the telephone played roles in the public arena but were slow to penetrate private life.² The spirit of the times is perhaps best symbolized by the monumental example of the Eiffel Tower, lit by electricity, the star of the Paris Exposition of 1889, then as now the icon of fin-de-siècle Paris. At the time, however, to the cultural elite of the older generation, the new structure epitomized everything that was decadent about the new age. We explore the official Eiffel tower Web site, especially the excerpts, comments and illustrations accompanying the presentation of the infamous 1887 [*Protest against the Tower of Monsieur Eiffel*](#).

Train travel came later to France than it did to more industrialized countries like England, Prussia and America, bringing with its delayed arrival a touch of anti-utilitarian romance, as reflected in Proust's description of the

fine, generous 1.22 train, whose hour of departure I could never read without a palpitating heart on the railway company's bills or in advertisements for circular tours...for it progressed magnificently overloaded with proffered names among which I did not know the one to choose, so impossible was it to sacrifice any (Proust, 2003, I, p. 548-49),

and of the simultaneously "marvelous" and "tragic" nature of railway stations with their "vast, glass-roofed sheds, like that of Saint-Lazare" (Proust, 2003, II, p. 303). And in the dynamic movement depicted in Monet's 1877 [*Gare St-Lazare*](#), students see the visual analogue to the rapid-paced prose of Proust's description.

The later advent of cars and airplanes accelerated the shift of perspective in Proust's world. When the Narrator hires a car to take him around the countryside at Balbec, transportation that "covered in one bound twenty paces of an excellent horse," he is struck by the realization that "Distances are only the relation of space to time and vary with it" (Proust, 2003, IV, p. 537-38). The sight of an airplane has a similar effect on the Narrator, underscoring a new sense of the relativity of time and space. His glance drawn to a plane in the sky, the Narrator notes that although "an airplane at six thousand feet is no further away than a train at two thousand yards," the distances "appear different to us because the reach seemed impossible...the identical trajectory occurring in a purer medium, with no obstacle between the traveler and his starting point" (Proust, 2003, V, p. 547). The altered perception of the relation between time and space that accompanied

contemporary technological advances changed the way people looked at and thought about the world.

The new modes of perception brought about by technology found their way into the arts, especially painting. As Theodore J. Johnson writes, Proust “literally grew up with Impressionism” (1975, p.28). With the help of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s online *Timeline of Art History*, we look at paintings by Degas, Sisley, Pissarro, Manet ([Impressionism: Art and Modernity](#)). We view three paintings that Proust specifically mentions in his work: Monet’s [Cathedral at Rouen](#), his [Nymphéas](#), and Renoir’s [Mme Charpentier and her children](#), about which Proust asks in *Time Regained*: “Will not posterity, when it looks at our time, find the poetry of an elegant home and beautifully dressed women in the drawing-room of the publisher Charpentier as painted by Renoir?” (Proust, 2003, VI, p. 45). Proust’s notice of this particular painting, a utopian depiction of a bourgeois family from the late 1870s, marks a momentary meeting of minds between the author and Renoir, a painter whose sympathetic impressionist portrayals of everyday life conspicuously resisted the “subjective uncertainties” that were typical of his fellow artists in the later years of the belle époque (Distel, n.d.). “‘Why shouldn't art be pretty?’ he said, ‘There are enough unpleasant things in the world’” (Renoir, 2004, para. 4). We look at the dissolution of conventional ways of representation in the arts as evidence of corresponding dislocations in the structure of belle époque society. Examining stylistic transitions in the direction of increasing abstraction from impressionism to post-impressionism to cubism and abstract art, we view paintings by Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, ([Post-Impressionism](#)) and [Matisse](#). Then we view Picasso’s [Demoiselles d'Avignon](#) (1907) and [Woman with a Guitar](#) (1913), and Braque’s [Man with a Guitar](#) (1911-12), discussing the changing ways of looking at the world these works reveal, the distortions and ambiguities that take on literary form in Proust’s blurring of waking and sleeping states, in the confusion of sexual identities that play a fundamental role in the novel and in the art of belle époque Paris in general.

The growing enthusiasm for music halls like the Chat Noir, the Olympia (both mentioned in Proust’s novel), and the Moulin Rouge in the years before 1900 is attested both by paintings like Manet’s [Le Bar aux Folies-bergères](#) (1882) and Béraud’s [Bar de Paris](#) (1885-90). Later, in the 1890s, the posters of [Toulouse-Lautrec](#) and [Jules Chéret](#) promoted this widely-popular diversion in a correspondingly new art form. New sorts of public entertainment became available to all audiences, elite and popular. The arrival of aristocratic Russian émigrés fleeing the political events of 1905 stimulated a sympathetic curiosity about the legendary Russian Imperial Ballet among the Parisian upper classes. In 1909, Diaghilev established the [Ballets Russes](#) in Paris; in 1910, Proust attended the premiere of *Schéhrazade*, with Nijinsky and Ida Rubinstein dancing (Caws, 2003). The acclaim for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, a company that epitomized in dance

the passion for an intermingling of the arts that Proust brings to the novel, acutely reflects the spirit of the times (Carter, 2000). The collaboration of talents that Diaghilev orchestrated had, in Proust's own words, "created a revolution as profound as Impressionism itself" (Proust, 2003, V, p. 314-315). The Parisian audience welcomed this "prodigious flowering of the Russian Ballet" (Proust, 2003, IV, p. 193) that sprang from the synthesis of the music composed by Igor Stravinsky, the choreography of Fokine, the dancing of Nijinsky and Ida Rubinstein, the art and scenarios of [Jean Cocteau](#), the sets and costumes designed by Leon Bakst, Alexandre Benois and Pablo Picasso. In class, we look at costumes and set designs from [Schéhérazade](#), listen to Stravinsky's music for and watch scenes from the ballet [Firebird](#), music and dance that convey the changing artistic climate of Paris in the teens.

Having completed our preparatory overview of Proust's times, we are now ready to enter the more detailed world of the novel. The order of cultural topics as they appear in the text serves as the basic guide to the introduction of complementary media.

Medieval Architecture

At this point, when we are about to start our actual reading of Proust, beginning as he does early in the text with allusions to Gothic architecture, we touch upon the broad subject of the revivals of medievalism and romanticism in France as reactions to naturalism and realism, and the role these retrospective preoccupations play in the cultural innovations of the belle époque. In the opening section, "Combray," Proust gives particular attention to the detailed description of the church of Saint-Hilaire, its porch, stained glass windows, bell tower, crypt, "the articulation of parts" offering us the "first representation of form and structure in the book," and introducing a metaphor that Proust will return to frequently in describing the composition of his novel (Shattuck, 2001, p. 79).

Proust's knowledge of Gothic architecture was shaped both by his readings— most particularly of John Ruskin's *Bible of Amiens* (a work that Proust translated from English), *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, *Lectures on Architecture and Painting*; of Huysmans' *La Cathédrale*; of Viollet-le Duc's *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture*; of Emile Mâle's *L'Art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France*—and by his frequent journeys to visit Gothic cathedrals. Proust's correspondence recorded impressions of his trips to the cathedrals at Chartres, Amiens, Rouen, St. Marks, Abbeville, Senlis, Laon, Coucy, Avallon, and Dijon among others. He also traveled to Norman churches in Caen, Dives, Lisieux, Evreux, Bayeux (Johnson, 1987, p. 134).

Mâle's book, familiar to Proust, describes the didactic function of the sculpture and decoration of medieval cathedrals in much the same way as Proust would describe that of

his own “cathedral novel,” that “vast encyclopedia of Man and a mirror in which every man can see himself, scrutinize himself, and know himself” (Johnson, 1987, p. 146). If, for Proust, art offers the means to see many different worlds through many different eyes, then similarly for M^âle:

The Middle Ages conceived of art as teaching. Everything that it was useful to man to know, the history of the world since its creation, the dogmas of religion, the examples of the saints, the hierarchy of the virtues, the range of the sciences and of the arts and trades, all these were taught to him by the stained glass windows of the church or by the statues of the porch (as cited in Johnson, 1987, p. 145).

The opening section of *Swann’s Way*, “Combray,” in which Proust describes the small town where the Narrator and his family spend their summers, is filled with references to medieval church architecture. We use the Metropolitan Museum’s Web site to discuss Gothic architecture and its related sculpture and stained glass ([Gothic Art](#)). The grandmother’s gifts to her grandson consist of reproductions of paintings rather than actual photographs depicting cities and cathedrals. The Narrator’s grandmother offers him “photographs of ‘[Chartres Cathedral](#)’ after Corot...which were a stage higher in the scale of art” (Proust, 2003, I, p. 54); and, following her example, I introduce students to the medieval world of Gothic cathedrals by sharing with them images of churches, of their architectural and decorative details, an exercise that helps students understand the ways Proust links the Gothic era to the history, music, art, and learning of later times.

Painting

The revisiting of one motif, one object, one setting is essential to Proust’s narrative, an aspect of his art, he tells us explicitly, that was particularly inspired by two painters: by his older contemporary, the impressionist Monet; and by the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Vermeer, whose work underwent a substantial revival of interest in Proust’s time. The Narrator observes that Vermeer shows us “fragments of an identical world... however great the genius with which they have been re-created, the same table, the same carpet, the same woman, the same novel and unique beauty...if one doesn’t try to relate it all through subject matter but to isolate the distinctive impression produced by the colour” (Proust, 2003, V, p. 508). In a crucial episode, the fictional novelist Bergotte, contemplating Vermeer’s [View of Delft](#), remarks wistfully how he too, in his writing, could have “with a few layers of colour, made [his] language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall” (Proust, 2003, V, p. 244).

The reader interprets this conventional literary image, the making of colorful language, as serving a larger thematic purpose, of standing for the author’s intuition, conveyed

throughout the *Search*, that the modern novelist can use narration in something like the way that modern painters use color. But how does Proust convince us that this intuition is sound? What is the nature of the connection that he is trying to establish between painterly color and narrative?

For Proust, the iterative element that contemporary artists and critics found so congenial in Vermeer's paintings had been raised to a fundamental principle of the arts by the work of Monet, especially in the famous sequences of canvases "like the fifty cathedrals or the forty [waterlilies](#)" (Proust, 1971, Sainte-Beuve and Balzac, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 276). The correspondences between Proust's description of the water lilies on the Vivonne in *Search* and Monet's series of paintings have been frequently noted (see Johnson, 1975). Read separately, mentions of time and memory in Proust's mimeses of and musings about Monet can seem casual or off-hand— routine soundings of the title theme of his novel. When, on the other hand, these writings are read together in chronological sequence as in Johnson's essay, we can begin to glimpse the developing connection in Proust's mind between color and time: Different conditions of light and atmosphere in the physical space represented by Monet's paintings can be associated with different conditions in the time of the narrative world of these paintings.

Here, stripped of much of the intervening descriptive detail that seems designed to soften its schematic character, is the key passage linking color and time in the Monet water-lilies imitation that appears in the Vivonne description in *Swann's Way*: The light "gave the flowers a soil of a *colour* ... whether *sparkling* beneath the water-lilies in the *afternoon* ... or *glowing*, towards *evening*... *ceaselessly changing yet remaining always in harmony, around the less mutable colours* of the flowers themselves, with ... *all that is infinite---in the passing hour* [italics added], it seemed to have made them blossom in the sky itself" (Proust, 2003, I, p. 239-40). This interaction between word and image, as students read Proust's text and look at Monet's painting, helps students to see the fundamental nature of the similarities between the writer's and the painter's stories-- how the same waterlilies look different at different times.

In the second section of *Swann's Way*, "Swann in Love," an intensive analysis of the evolution of Swann's obsessive love for the ambiguously-depicted Odette de Cr cy, Proust turns for his painterly analogue to the work of the Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli. Interest in Botticelli, coinciding with a revival of interest in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, captured the scholarly and popular imagination of Proust's generation. In fact, Botticelli was the subject of more books written in English between the years 1900 and 1920 than was any other painter (Levey, 1960).

We look at this Botticelli vogue as a revival of a revival, and discuss the cyclical characteristics of change in the arts and society. It is the quattrocento's interest in reviving gothic idealism and courtly romance, epitomized by Botticelli's maidens, that the late nineteenth-century Swann identifies with and employs to assemble the framework necessary to contain his romantic infatuation with Odette (Dempsey, n.d.).

Odette as she is seen by others, the Odette whom Swann at first glance shunned as a woman who "gave him... a sort of physical repulsion," with a "profile too sharp... cheekbones... too prominent... eyes so large they seemed to droop beneath their own weight, strain[ing] the rest of her face" (Proust, 2003, I, p. 276) is transfigured through the medium of Botticelli's [*Zipporah*](#) and [*Madonna of the Pomegranates*](#) into a personification of feminine perfection that Swann alone can recognize. But it is only as this idealized version of a morally and socially superior woman that Swann can love Odette, for associating Odette with these masterpieces "enabled him, like a title, to introduce the image of Odette into a world of dreams and fancies which, until then, she had been debarred from entering, and where she assumed a new and nobler form" (Proust, 2003, I, p. 317).

What is meant to be a palpable disparity between the picture of Odette known to the rest of the world and the image created by Swann out of Botticelli maidens remains a purely abstract construct for students unfamiliar with the Renaissance painter's work. Accompanying Proust's text with the two Botticelli paintings specifically mentioned is extraordinarily helpful in illustrating the dissonance between Swann's image of his Botticelli maiden and the Narrator's depiction of her real-world counterpart. Swann now sees in the transformed Odette, with "her loosened hair flowing down her cheeks, bending one knee in a slightly balletic pose... her head on one side, with those great eyes of hers which seemed so tired and sullen when there was nothing to animate her" a resemblance to Jethro's daughter, Zipporah; he sees in Odette's eyes the "downcast, heart-broken expression, which seems ready to succumb beneath the burden of a grief too heavy to be borne when they are merely allowing the Infant Jesus to play with a pomegranate" that characterizes the *Madonna of the Pomegranates* (Proust, 2003, I, p. 314, 398). And students come to see the nature and extent of Swann's self-deception. We examine the iconography of these paintings, the relationship of their narrative to courtly romance, and their place in the general belle époque revival of earlier arts. Students' discussion of Proust's particular intention in singling out these particular works of art helps sharpen their awareness of the processes that influence the choices novelists make. Swann seeks archetypes in the works of Renaissance painters not only in his amorous pursuits, but also in his more ordinary personal encounters. The same tendency to idealize that leads Swann to choose the Botticelli maiden as the model for Odette governs

the associations he establishes between other people in his world and the idealizing aspects of the portraits he humorously cites as their original models. Swann:

had always found a peculiar fascination in tracing in the paintings of the old masters not merely the general characteristics of the people whom he encountered in his daily life, but rather what seems least susceptible of generalization, the individual features of men and women whom he knew...in the colouring of a Ghirlandaio, the nose of M. de Palancy (Proust, 2003, I, p. 315).

In this Ghirlandaio painting ([*Old man with a young boy*](#)), the idealized beauty of the young boy is underscored by its contrast with the naturalism of the grandfather's portrayal. And Swann claims to find the archetype of the Narrator's Jewish friend, Bloch, in the middle-eastern facial features of the subject of Bellini's [*Sultan Mehmet II*](#): "It's an astonishing likeness; he has the same arched eyebrows and hooked nose and prominent cheekbones. When he has a little beard he'll be Mahomet himself" (Proust, 2003, I, p. 134).

When Swann names the kitchen maid "Giotto's Charity," an otherwise abstract image acquires meaning for students when paired with a viewing of the [*Vices and Virtues*](#) images from the Arena chapel in Padua. The Narrator recalls that "there must have been a good deal of reality in those Virtues and Vices of Padua, since they seemed to me as alive as the pregnant servant, and since she herself did not appear to me much less allegorical" (Proust, 2003, I, p. 113). Students can discuss the similarities and differences between the kinds of idealization seen in an early fourteenth-century work like Giotto's and those found almost two hundred years later in the late fifteenth-century works of Botticelli, Ghirlandaio and Bellini. But more to the point, we can then ask what role these kinds of idealizing tendencies played in Proust's time.

It is fitting that Swann, a dilettante whom Proust describes as having squandered his talent, should be engaged in writing a scholarly work that will never be finished—a study of Vermeer. For it is Vermeer, who owed his fame to the tastes of Proust's time rather than his own, who will serve as the Proustian paradigm of the perfect artist who lives outside of time. In the oft-cited "patch of yellow wall" episode of the fictional writer Bergotte's death at an exhibition of Vermeer's *A View of Delft*, the novelist invokes the connection between literature and painting that we have already noted. We can consider this scene as one in a series of cautionary tales (like Swann's wasted talent or the Narrator's idle time in society), about the total sacrifice demanded of the artist. It will serve, along with a discussion and viewing of the Vermeer painting, not only as a means of tracing the Narrator's experiences, vicarious or personal, with art and its practitioners

but also as the springboard for a discussion of the relation of the art of any period to its own times and, in particular, of Proust to his times.

Throughout much of the 1800s, an explicit interest in seventeenth-century Dutch painting was expressed by such deliberately realist novelists as Balzac, George Eliot, and Hardy, writers who felt an affinity for the attention to everyday detail in these works. But Proust, while sometimes joining these novelists in referencing Dutch painting in his literary images, went further. Along with the painters and art critics of his time, Proust looked at typical Dutch painting of the Golden Age less as a source for examples of naturalistically-rendered depictions of persons and objects and more as a formally coherent artistic whole. And in Vermeer in particular, in the way he used light and color to integrate the material elements of the closely-observed world of his paintings, Proust found a corollary to his own literary technique, “for style for the writer, no less than colour for the painter, is a question not of technique but of vision” (Proust, 2003, VI, p. 299). Ruth Yeazell (2008) has noted that “something like this dialectic between objects and light, between material reality and the ineffable medium of perception, will repeat itself throughout Proust’s work, as beauty alternately inheres or can be discovered in the most ordinary things” (p. 169). Arthur K. Wheelock locates the Proustian blurring of boundaries in *View of Delft*, where “brickwork and patchwork metamorphose before the eyes into pure esthetic patterns, variations of color and light that animate the forms” (cited in Berger, 1988, p. 484). Vermeer’s painting, which “may best be approached from a literary perspective because it involves an element of reflexivity more easily manifested in verbal than in pictorial art” would naturally appeal to a writer’s sensibility like Proust’s (Berger, 1988, p. 464). And in the same way that Vermeer’s work can be seen as painting about painting, Proust’s work can be seen as a novel about writing novels.

Time in the realist novel is historical time—the counterpart in a literary narrative of the way time is organized in non-fictional writing. Proust, on the other hand, fashions from his experience of post-realist trends in painting and art criticism an alternate approach to the narrative time of the realist novel. His novel follows the example of contemporary painting in renouncing the mission of making a photographic-like representation of reality. For Proust, memory is the key to finding a way to relate the space of painting to the narrative of the novel, distance to time, the objective to the subjective, perception to idea—a family of interconnected issues that characterizes the intellectual concerns of the belle époque as well as its cultural preoccupations. With two crucial sentences, almost a formula, in a comment about Elstir, Proust takes us from space to memory to time to form to thought:

Surfaces and volumes are in reality independent of the names of objects which our memory imposes on them when we have recognized them. Elstir

sought to extract what he already knew from what he had just felt; he had often been at pains to dissolve that compound of reasoning that we call vision (Proust, 2003, III, p. 574).

By looking closely at the “patch of yellow wall” that Bergotte sees just before he dies, the painted equivalent of the moments of involuntary memory that will lead the Narrator to his novel in which events in time are like the color of Monet’s flowers “whose nuances match, harmonize infinitely in a blue or soft pink expanse which the painter has powerfully and intentionally dematerialized, as it were, from everything that isn’t color” (Proust, 1971, *Les éblouissements, Essais et articles*, p. 539-40), students can share in the experience of Proust’s interdisciplinary approach to the arts, finding for themselves the correspondences between the painted and the written worlds that Proust creates.

Dress and the Decorative Arts

She was surrounded by her garments as by the delicate and spiritualised machinery of a whole civilization (Proust, 2003, II, p. 267).

Proust’s novel, examining the vagaries of time and taste, offers readers a panorama of the changing fashions in upper class dress from the late 1800s through the years of World War I. Proust scrupulously documented the many detailed descriptions of dress that make up his novel—his portraits of society women in their evening gowns, in their “at home” attire, in their salon dresses, of the furniture that complemented their lifestyles and their status in French society.

Furniture

The furniture and other decorative objects that are described by the Narrator as forming the background of the social world of his childhood are intimately connected with the personal history of the adults who inhabit that world. We look at period pieces from the Old Regime, Empire, Restoration and Second Empire that furnish the aristocratic drawing rooms of the belle époque, rooms “hung with yellow silk, against which the [settees](#) and the admirable armchairs upholstered in [Beauvais tapestry](#) stood out with the almost purple redness of ripe raspberries” (Proust, 2003, III, p. 251) and discuss what it might mean to have inherited such an armchair. We see luxurious rooms paneled by the seventeenth-century sculptor and cabinet-maker [César Bagard](#) in the home of the Baron de Charlus, with “those fine laths that they used to cut, so supple that the joiner would twist them sometimes into little shells and flowers, like the ribbons round a nosegay” (Proust, 2003, II, p. 415). We look at the “marvelous [Bouille](#) furniture” in the Guermantes’ home (Proust, 2003, III, p. 755) and read about the reemergence of [Empire](#) style furnishings that the Duchess of Guermantes has brought down from her mother-in-

law's attic, neoclassical and orientalizing pieces with "Sphinxes crouching at the feet of the armchairs...snakes coiled around candelabra, a huge Muse who holds out a little torch for you to play cards under...Pompeian lamps...boat-shaped beds which look as if they had been found floating on the Nile" (Proust, 2003, III, p. 711).

Clearly separating her tastes from those of the upper classes is Odette's penchant for the clutter of Oriental objects that decorated her apartment, a bourgeois vulgarization of an aristocratic vogue for eastern exoticism that had faded with the end of the Second Empire and would return in the last years of the belle époque. We examine a Web site that offers a history of the influx of Oriental wares into Western Europe, with examples of fans, ceramics, vases that were common decorative items in Parisian homes ([Exoticism](#)). In Odette's apartment, the staircase with "dark painted walls hung with Oriental draperies, strings of Turkish beads, and a huge Japanese lantern suspended by a silken cord" led to a sitting room whose alcoves were "sheltered by enormous palms growing out of pots of Chinese porcelain, or by screens upon which were fastened fans and bows of ribbon," adorned with "great cushions of Japanese silk," "fiery-tongued dragons painted on a bowl or stitched on a screen...a dromedary of inlaid silverwork with ruby eyes...a toad carved in jade" (Proust, 2003, I, p. 311, 313). But after her advantageous marriage to Swann, Odette "began to replace in this jumble a number of the Chinese ornaments...by a swarm of little chairs and stools and things draped in old Louis XVI silks" (Proust, 2003, II, p. 153-54), and the dark walls of her apartment are "decorated in the Louis XVI style, all white, with a sprinkling of blue hydrangeas" (Proust, 2003, I, p. 605).

Dress

In the final visit to the Bois de Boulogne, (a setting already seen in *Gigi*), students can read a diary of the changing fashions in dress of the upper classes from the time of the Narrator's childhood, twenty years before the turn of the century, until his return to the Paris park as an adult. In *Gigi*, the sumptuous gowns worn by the clients at Maxim's, the "day" dresses worn by the aristocratic women on their promenades through the Bois, the leisure dress for seaside and sport, the Whistler-like costumes of rakish Uncle Honoré, all serve to give students a feeling for the sensual connection between the material arts and the social life of the period.

The descriptions of Odette de Crécy's dress, her costumes reflecting a shift in both her social status and Parisian fashions, serve to chronicle the changing dress styles that complement the changing times in depictions that have "enough of the documentary record about them to serve at least as corroborative evidence for the professional social historian" (Bowie, 1998, p. 75). When we first meet Odette in the 1870s, the off-putting thinness and sharpness of her face are exaggerated by the current hairstyle, with "masses of hair ...drawn forward in a fringe, raised in crimped waves and falling in stray locks

over the ears.” Her figure is hidden beneath the fashionable “balloon of her double skirts,” the “frills, the flounces...the bows, the festoons of lace, the fringes of dangling jet beads” in which she was in danger of either “suffocation” or being “completely buried” (Proust, 2003, I, p. 278) ([Tissot](#); [Renoir](#)). Years later, in 1892, we see her in the Bois de Boulogne as the mother of Gilberte and the elegant wife of Swann, dressed like a “queen,” “trailing behind her the long train of her lilac skirt...occasionally looking down at the handle of her parasol” and wearing one of those “little women’s hats, so low-crowned as to seem no more than garlands” (Proust, 2003, I: 596, 603). The closing scene in *Gigi*, where the now-respectably married Leslie Caron-Gigi character appears in the Bois in a long lilac dress, is a clear homage to Proust’s description of Odette’s outfit. By 1896, Odette, “liberated” from the “pads, the preposterous ‘bustle’” that so hid her figure, is now clothed in the “bright and billowing silk of a [Watteau](#) housecoat.” Even her face appears to have “more breadth” thanks to the “new way in which she braided her hair” (Proust, 2003, II, p. 262-65). And with the Narrator’s final return to the Bois, to the “inhuman emptiness of this deconsecrated forest” where carriages have been replaced by cars, we witness a hodgepodge of retrospective dress motifs: “Graeco-Saxon tunics, pleated à la Tanagra, or sometimes in the Directoire style, accentuated Liberty chiffons sprinkled with flowers like wallpaper...hats on which have been heaped the spoils of aviary or kitchen-garden” (Proust, 2003, I, p. 606, 603-4) ([Classicism in Modern Dress; hat](#)).

For Proust, costume, like painting, music, and architecture, is inseparable from the other arts. He links the exclusive dresses of the famous Venetian designer Mariano Fortuny to architectural motifs, to Carpaccio paintings, to set designs. He wrote to Maria de Madrazo, related by marriage to Fortuny, requesting information he needed for the description of a dressing gown worn by the Narrator’s fiancé, Albertine. Proust particularly wanted to know if there were motifs that Fortuny had adapted, for example “those coupled birds, drinking...from a vase, which are so recurrent on the Byzantine capitals in St. Mark’s” (Kolb, 1992, p. 334-35). He told Maria de Madrazo that the “Fortuny leitmotif,” though “not very extensive,” was nevertheless “crucial...partly sensual, poetic and sorrowful” (Kolb, 1992, p. 341).

Even more pointedly, Proust links Fortuny’s designs to the paintings of the Venetian Carpaccio, most particularly that of *The Healing of a Madman* (Proust, 2003, V, p. 876). Proust writes in *The Fugitive*: “On the back of one of the [Compagnie della Calza](#) identifiable from the emblem, embroidered in gold and pearls on their sleeves or their collars, of the merry confraternity to which they were affiliated, I had just recognized the cloak which Albertine had put on to come with me to Versailles” (Proust, 2003, V, p. 877). And in a further layering of allusions, Proust compares the retrospective byzantinism of the Fortuny gowns, “faithfully antique but markedly original,” to the

“theatrical designs of Sert, Bakst and Benois,” gowns that “like a stage décor” evoke “that Venice saturated with oriental splendor...the sunlight and the surrounding turbans, the fragmented, mysterious and complementary colour” (Proust, 2003, V, p. 497-98). Students look at the details of images from the painting alongside the [Fortuny](#) images from the Web site of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For a more complete picture of the dress of belle époque aristocratic Paris, we turn to the couture of Paul Poiret. The Web sites from the 2007 Poiret exhibit at the Met, displaying the revived classical and oriental designs from the turn of the century through the 1920s, serve to document our discussion about dress in relation to customs, class, and society ([Poiret 1](#); [Poiret 2](#); [Poiret 3](#)). This visual study of the fashions in dress and décor so painstakingly described in the novel allows students to enter the salons of the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie, virtual visits that would have been a good deal less easy to arrange without the aid of modern technology.

Music

The field open to the musician is not a miserable stave of seven notes, but an immeasurable keyboard (still almost entirely unknown) on which, here and there only, separated by the thick darkness of its unexplored tracts, some few among the millions of keys of tenderness, of passion, of courage, of serenity, which compose it, each one differing from all the rest as one universe differs from another, have been discovered by a few great artists who do us the service, when they awaken in us the emotion corresponding to the theme they have discovered, of showing us what richness, what variety lies hidden, unknown to us, in that vast, unfathomed and forbidding night of our soul which we take to be an impenetrable void (Proust, 2003, I, p. 497).

For Proust, time could be used to organize events in his novel much in the same unconventional ways that color was being used in contemporary painting to organize objects in space. With music as with painting, it is the narrative component of the art, the melodic phrasing, rather than the harmonies or rhythms that captures his writerly attention.

In “Swann in Love,” in much the same way as he appropriates the paintings of Botticelli to construct his love for Odette, Swann also adopts the “little phrase” of the Vinteuil sonata as the anthem of his love affair. Once again, Swann’s amateurish and solipsistic use of the arts for his own emotional purposes serves as a model of the superficial, of the failed vocation.

The Narrator's description of this musical phrase, whose opening notes recall "those interiors by [Pieter de Hooch](#) which are deepened by the narrow frame of a half-opened door, in the far distance, of a different colour, velvety with the radiance of some intervening light" (Proust, 2003, I, p. 308), is typically Proustian in the multi-sensory appeal of music that can be "heard, touched and visualized" (Bowie, 1998, p. 80). The little phrase, portrayed in a series of contrasts, "slender but robust...multiform but indivisible...smooth yet restless" is layered with sensual associations: the "fragrance of certain roses," the "moist air;" it "plunge[s]...drown[s]," later to "emerge for a few moments above the waves of sound...rapid, fragile, melancholy, incessant, sweet" suggesting "the possibility of a sort of rejuvenation" (Proust, 2003, I, p. 294-296). Here we find the pervasive layering of senses, of textures, of artistic disciplines that shapes Proust's prose throughout the novel, whether the subject is French Impressionist or Italian Renaissance paintings or pastry or clothing or Gothic cathedrals or music. In fact, in a 1904 article, "La mort des cathédrales," Proust links music, theater, and the liturgical ceremonies of the gothic cathedral to the compositions of Wagner, for "only Wagner had approached its [the liturgical ceremony's] beauty, by imitating it in *Parsifal*" (Proust, 1971, *Pastiches et mélanges*, p. 142).

Proust, an enthusiastic follower of contemporary music, warned critics against assigning a single source to Vinteuil's "little phrase." He asserted that Vinteuil's compositions, much like the paintings of Elstir, the writings of Bergotte, the theatrical performances of La Berma, and the characters that populate his novel, were amalgams of several archetypes. In a dedication for Jacques de Lacretelle, Proust attributed the inspiration for the "little phrase" to the works of Saint-Saëns, Fauré, Wagner, Schubert, Franck (*Hommage*, 1927). Various scholars have also singled out pieces by Debussy and Beethoven as some of the many possible models for the Vinteuil phrase. Confined to his apartment, using the [theatrophone](#), Proust listened to Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande* each evening that it was staged (Caws, 2003, p.72-73). Indeed, Proust's musical tastes and knowledge were so extensive that the search for a definitive model for the phrase seems futile. But students reading Proust's first description of the little phrase, analyzing the interplay of literary motifs that shapes that passage, closely examining the use of color, texture, odors, movement, and then listening to excerpts on CDs from some of the possible sources, from Franck's [Sonata in A for Violin and Piano](#), from Debussy's *La Mer*, from Fauré's *Sonata for Violin and Piano no.1 in D minor*, can appreciate the exchange between violin and piano, the musical forms and ideas that are echoed in Proust's prose (Proust, 2003, I, p. 294-99).

Conclusion

Students can certainly profit from reading Proust's *Search*, or any novel outside the range of their immediate cultural familiarity, without possessing a thorough understanding of

the multitude of allusions that provide the framework for the work's imagery. But with a novel like Proust's, a literary structure that deliberately imitates the forms of the visual and musical culture of its time, the reader who misses the aesthetic resonances of the author's rhetoric and imagery is limited to a purely intellectual, sterile reading of a work whose principal thematic demand is a willing suspension of intellect in the service of perceptible experience. If, in addition to the text, instructors can bring elements of Proust's cultural world to their students, make the formal and metaphorical fabric of the novel accessible in ways that lead to a reading of the work as it was meant to be read by the author's contemporaries, then students can participate in the work of art in a way that accords with the author's sensibilities and design. Offering students a variety of sensory experiences is not only a means of responding sympathetically to Proust's work, but also a way of challenging students to explore the many possible approaches, through their own particular learning styles, that will lead them to a clearer understanding of the novel. André Aciman (2004) has said that Proust, whose "mind seems to be working on overdrive," forces us into

formulating ideas and entertaining ways of seeing things that would never have crossed our minds without him. He doesn't necessarily teach us new things; instead he teaches us how to re-examine what we had dimly perceived or never really thought through. And that, in a nutshell, is what good teaching is all about: not necessarily bringing new information, but new ways of examining information that has always been around us for a long time. (para. 4)

And this "good teaching" can be virtually multiplied and instantly delivered through the media and technology that are most familiar to our students, challenging them to explore a largely unknown and bygone world, providing a modern means of remotely accessing that distant place and time.

Notes

¹ Social and cultural historians tend to use the term *belle époque* differently. The socially coherent period 1871-1914 has a natural division around the year 1890 marked by the coming of age of the generation that was born in the 70s, the Dreyfus Affair and the Exhibition of 1889. The term *belle époque*, coined in the 1920's, originally connoted nostalgia for the "good old days" of the period 1890-1914. Artistically this latter period indeed has a very different "look" from that of 1870-1890 and cultural historians quite reasonably tend to begin their *belle epoch* at 1890. Social historians, on the other hand, tend to be more interested in the connections rather than in the disjunctions between the two halves of this period. The trend in interdisciplinary usage of the term seems to be in

the direction of emphasizing the continuities of the social historians. In the field of English language scholarship of French literature this tendency to take an integrated view of the period is usually said to have begun with Edmund Wilson's 1931 *Axel's Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*.

² See Johnson, 1975, for further discussion.

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Author Biography:

Janet Moser is Associate Professor of English and Director of Freshman Composition at Brooklyn College, CUNY, where she teaches courses in composition and comparative literature. Her recent research interests include the use of examples from the rhetoric of canonically serious literature as models for analysis and imitation in basic composition courses, and the use of electronic resources to integrate socially, culturally and historically relevant sounds and images into the study of literature.

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