



A History of Wine, Spirits and Drunkenness in Art

A Thesis

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Dedication

To Dr. William Welch Sr., my father, for introducing the world to me, not because he had to but because he wanted to; and to Dr. William Welch Jr., my brother, for instilling my love for art by letting a young boy pore over his college art history books and imagine what the stories were behind the art.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the intertwining narratives of wine, spirits, and drunkenness in art history, examining the cultural, social, and symbolic significance of these elements. In this case, I have examined the presentation of wine, spirits, and drunkenness in art in two significant art periods: the Dutch Golden Age of the 17th century and late 19th/early 20th-century Europe from Realism to Cubism. In doing this, I have also examined the cultural and political forces in place that shaped how alcohol consumption was perceived and presented by selected artists of these periods, some of whom were also enthusiastic consumers. While it is not my primary intent to provide commentary on the societal usage of wine and spirits, it is sometimes unavoidable and even necessary to understand why artists tackled this complex social issue as they did.

During the Dutch Golden Age, there was a triumphant and euphoric feeling from those who were part of this unique European State. In the midst of throwing off the Habsburg of Spain, the newly minted Dutch Republic was unencumbered by a self-serving monarchy and adopted a soft-governance approach which allowed for unique freedoms within Dutch society. As a result of these circumstances, and taking advantage of their geographical location in Europe, the Dutch Republic became the wealthiest country on the continent through their global trading empire. The Dutch Reformed Church, while not technically a state church but rather a “privileged” one, scraped off the largess of the previous Catholic theology and centered itself as an unadorned pathway to God. As a result, church commissions for religious paintings were no longer a source of income for Dutch artists and, as a consequence, those artists pivoted to other subjects that would appeal to a patriotic, growing, and generous merchant class and the category of Dutch genre painting evolved. All manner of Dutch life was represented including drinking to excess and the social disorder that was a result. However, it was generally portrayed with gentleness and humor and without strong moral judgement.

By contrast, France was in an extreme state of political and social upheaval during the early and middle 19th century and that turmoil permeated all walks of French life including the arts. With the Industrial Revolution driving a wedge between the “haves” and “have nots” and subjugating the less fortunate working class to the squalor of the hastily created, dehumanizing cityscapes of the day, coping often meant abusing alcohol and especially absinthe, known as the *green fairy*. The artists of that era, from Realists to Cubists and from Manet to Picasso, many of

whom were also enthusiastic consumers of absinthe, captured the human damage inflicted and it is reflected in their poignant works.

By examining works of artists of both the Dutch Golden Age and those of Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century, I have drawn contrasts between the two approaches of representing the social phenomenon of the overindulgence of alcohol and what circumstances caused those differences to occur.

The Dutch Golden Age: 17th-Century Netherlands and Flanders

The Dutch Golden Age

It is important to understand which set of events created the “Dutch Golden Age” and, as a consequence, created the social climate that led to an incredibly rich concentration of artists during the 17th century in the Netherlands and led to their unique presentation of alcohol use in Dutch society.

What placed this in motion was the least golden of all human tragedies, war; the Eighty Years’ War to be specific. The initiation of this “eighty years” conflict was a combination of international political events set amidst the Protestant Reformation. It began around 1568 in Hapsburg Netherlands between local rebel groups and representatives of the Spanish King, Philip II, who ruled the Netherlands as part of his Hapsburg Empire. Philip II’s aim was twofold: return the Netherlands to Catholicism (it had embraced the Reformation in approximately 1520), and centralize the disjointed seventeen provinces of the region into one coherent state. This effort by the Spanish King was met peacefully at first but then turned violent as the Protestant Calvinists rose up against the local Crown Governor. This prompted an invasion by Spanish and Italian forces, led by the Duke of Alba, Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, which suppressed the rebellion. From this point on, there was an ebb and flow of continued rebelliousness followed by sometimes brutal military actions from the Crown forces and occasional prolonged truces. The French aligned themselves with the Hapsburg Netherlands in 1635 and that, along with the realities of a fading Spanish Empire, due to financial and military exhaustion, led Spain to the 1648 Peace of Münster and subsequent formal independence of the Dutch Republic (Franits, 2004; Hagen and Hagen, 2020).

As often is the case, results of this conflict had long lasting consequences. During the first portion of the war, the area now known as Belgium had been part of the provinces that comprised the Hapsburg Netherlands. However, what became modern day Belgium split away and remained under Spanish rule as it was predominantly Catholic. In fact, there was much migration in both directions during the latter stages of the war with Catholics moving south and Protestants moving north. The reason this is important is that it consolidated the vast majority Dutch Calvinists of the Dutch Reformed Church into the north and this had profound effect on the subject matter of Dutch

paintings of the 17th century. One of the facets of Dutch Calvinism and the Dutch Reformed Church, which became a privileged religion but not the state church, was the strong belief in self-governance which created a greater independence from top to bottom in Dutch society. This is totally opposite of what was going on across the rest of Europe where monarchies continued to rule with an autocratic iron fist. This “soft” governance allowed for the Dutch Republic to develop an expansive trading empire which included banking. This led to a very wealthy merchant and middle class who could afford to become patrons of the arts and particular artists (Franits, 2004; Hagen and Hagen, 2020).

The other extremely important result had to do with the tenets of Dutch Calvinism itself. Unlike the rest of Catholic Europe, Calvinist doctrine prohibited the placement of images in their churches but did not prohibit them in homes or civic buildings. Calvinists viewed adornment in churches as an obstruction of the path to God. This dramatically changed the traditional way of obtaining commissions for artists through ecclesiastical avenues of funding as the church was no longer supporting commissions for artists. As can be imagined, the resulting impact on subject matter for inspiration became almost limitless as opposed to most European countries whose artists were dependent on the church or on aristocratic sources for commissions, and thus, limited to a narrow range of allowable content, primarily religious/historical. The Dutch, with its growing commercial class, set the stage for an explosion in artistic creativity in both quality and a monumental broadening of paintable topics. This directly led to something called “Genre Paintings” which included a colorful sub-genre called *Merry Company* (Franits, 2004).

Before proceeding to genre paintings and *Merry Company*, I need to address the reality of “the hierarchy of painting genre.” Beginning during the Renaissance, the academics of the period decided to create a value system of painting genre based on the ideal human form. The four genre categories in order of academic worth were history painting, portrait painting, genre painting (everyday life), and still life. As can be imagined, history painting often intersected with religious painting and was considered the height of moral and spiritual clarity. Because not following this hierarchy would relegate you to a lower standard of artist, most artists complied with this value system to stay relevant and be funded (Lee, 2016).

However, when the Dutch Calvinists forbade adornment in their churches in the 17th century, cracks in the hierarchy started to become evident. What had been a profitable formula for artists of this period, including Rembrandt van Rijn, was no longer quite as clear a path to the top

of the artistic ladder. Indeed, Rembrandt continued to paint historical paintings throughout his career, as did other notable artists of this period, in addition to the other genre on the list, but the market was no longer being propped up by the Church and that category of painting became increasingly hard to sell in the Netherlands. While he, like most artists of the period, wanted to maintain his lofty professional perch by creating historical paintings that complied with the top tier of hierarchy of painting genre, Rembrandt was conflicted because he also wanted and needed to sell paintings (Franits, 2004; Hagen and Hagen, 2020).

Thus, the aftermath of the creation of the Dutch Republic and freedom from the yoke of Spanish Catholic rule saw an explosion of economic wealth and a burgeoning middle and merchant/entrepreneurial class and a strong surge of Dutch nationalism which caused the category of genre painting to explode. In truth, it also seems to have been a combination of the newfound freedom of artists to paint what they wanted instead of being dictated to by the “Academy,” coupled with a strong market for Dutch scenes, whether it be the Dutch landscape or everyday Dutch life. It is also curious that while the Dutch were at war during almost all of the first half of the 17th century, battle scenes were rare. Perhaps this is because most of the armies of this conflict were mercenary and thus didn’t tug at the heartstrings of Dutch emotions. Fig. 1 provides some sense of what was popular and how it changed over time (Hagen and Hagen, 2020; Franits, 2004).

Subject Matter	1605–1624	1645–1650
Biblical scenes	42.2%	18%
Portraits	18%	18.3%
Land- and seascapes	12.4%	21%
Still lifes	8.5%	11.7%
Scenes from daily life (genre)	6.1%	12.9%
Other	12.8%	18.1%

Figure 1: *Painting types that were most popular, based on inventories from Haarlem* (Janson, 2024).

Naval scenes did better probably because the Dutch were a true world naval power. Other sub-genres that had strong popularity both with the artists and the paying public were group paintings and portraits. Especially with regards to group paintings, this seems to be a Dutch specialty of the period. We see this repeatedly during this era and certainly Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch* is the most famous example. They

generally were on a massive scale and possibly this is an effort by the artists to replace the religious subject matter they had lost, which was often grandiose in size and drama with small militia groupings in equally dramatic pose and scale (Franits, 2004; Hagen and Hagen, 2020).

Genre painting, in its simplest, is the painting of everyday scenes. For instance, this could be in the form of a maid doing household chores as was done more than once by Johannes Vermeer. Certainly Vermeer, who was a painstakingly slow painter with a very limited output, produced a reoccurring grouping of one or two individuals, softly lit from one side to add to the drama; this lighting is what is called “cellar light.” Many tried to replicate his technique, but he is by far the most noteworthy. In truth, Vermeer’s style produced what amounts to a “human still life portrait.” There is little or no implied movement in his models (Hagen and Hagen, 2020).

Another sub-genre featured everyday people and peasants at work or play and almost everything in between. Then there was something called *Merry Company*. In its most basic, it was composed of small groups of people sitting, or lounging, around a table or bar, or in a brothel, enjoying the merriment of each other and more often than not, drink and music. At the surface, there is a display of over-the-top merriment and almost cartoonish in its presentation. However, on closer inspection, there seems to always be uncertainty in what we are actually seeing. If women are present in a tavern scene, are they a respectable part of the entourage or prostitutes plying their trade? It is as though the artist enjoyed the confusion that his painting conveyed (Franits, 2004; Hagen and Hagen, 2020).

Certainly, some painters inserted moralistic lessons of sobriety and the dangers of “loose living” within these *Merry Company* scenes, but many other painters seemed to just enjoy the festiveness of the scene without too much thought about what societal message it might send. Some of the latter can be chalked up to the heady days that the Dutch Republic was experiencing as it flexed its economic muscles across Europe and the globe. I suspect that there was also a marketing ploy to sell paintings. While there was an explosion of wealth to spend on art, there was also an explosion of artists to exploit this and the competition was great; indeed, the financial path of an artist in this period was tedious at best (Hagen and Hagen, 2020; Janson, 2024).

Thus, with so much to choose from, I have focused on six artists of the period that were the most prominent in the *Merry Company* movement as well as scenes from everyday life; five are Dutch, of which one is a rare female artist, and one is Flemish (Franits, 2004).

The Artists

Jan Steen is probably the most famous of the *Merry Company* painters during the Dutch Golden Age. He was extremely prolific and, in truth, painted in most categories of the hierarchy: historical,

landscape, and still life in addition to genre painting, but his scenes of home and tavern life are the most notable and endearing. He often included himself and his family in his paintings and seemed to revel in that personal connection. Steen came from a brewing family and so tavern scenes were natural scapes for him to paint; he even owned a brewery at one stage in his life. I would compare him to the Shakespearean character Falstaff as he seemed to have a bigger than life personality and presence (Franits, 2004).



Figure 2: Steen, *The Dissolute Household*, 1663-1664, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Steen was an active artist but there are four paintings that I consider the most representative of his involvement in the *Merry Company* sub-genre. The first, *The Dissolute Household* (1663-1664) (Fig. 2), shows a chaotic household in total disarray and seemingly near to collapse. And yet, the characters in this painting do not seem to be bothered in the least over the turmoil around them. In fact, they seem to be celebrating the chaos. What makes this painting more compelling is that the gentleman in the center is Jan Steen, clutching the maid's hand while she pours his obviously heavily intoxicated wife yet another glass of wine. There is symbology all around in this painting; the mischievous cat in the foreground and at the top of the painting, a beggar's crutch and can topped by the jack of spades indicates significant misfortune is near.

Steen presents the family's excessively immoral behavior in a stage-like setting, turning those offenses into comedic entertainment. By pitting the excess of a prospering society against the tenets set by the religious establishment, *The Dissolute Household* offers audiences a choice: to revel in the subjects' "hedonism, or to laugh at them while maintaining the moral high ground" (Ahearn, Greenho and Meskan, 2019).



Figure 3: Steen, *The Dissolute Household Painting*, 1661-1664, Wellington Museum, London.

There were actually two notable *The Dissolute Household* paintings produced by Steen and I have also included the other from between 1661-1664 (Fig. 3). It has a lot of the same characteristics and symbology of the 1663-1664 version; slovenly behavior, domestic chaos, and, of course, excessive alcohol use. And as in the other, Jan Steen and his wife are the main players in this scene. While there is much to feel guilty about in these paintings, you don't sense that Steen is implying guilt but

just a comical view of a household off the rails. In fact, this presentation was in fashion with Dutch and Flemish artists during this period (Franits, 2004).

This “dissolute self-portrait” style, in sharp contrast to the more buttoned up self-portraits of the Renaissance, for instance, were unique to the 17th-century Dutch painters who chose to present themselves in an unseemlier light. Purposely dropping the noble robes of the *pictor doctus* (*learned painters*), which had been cultivated by Renaissance painters, presenting themselves as intellectuals, the Dutch and Flemish painters of this period smoked, drank and chased women, embracing the many behaviors that art theorists and the culture at large disparaged. Dissolute self-portraits also reflect and responded to a larger trend regarding artistic identity in the seventeenth century, notably, the stereotype *Hoe schilder hoe wilder* [the more of a painter, the wilder he is] that posited Dutch and Flemish artists as intrinsically unruly characters prone to prodigality and dissolution. Artists embraced this special identity which in turn granted them certain freedoms from social norms and a license to misbehave. In short, they had set the bar of expectations exceedingly low (Cartwright, 2007, as cited in Janson, 2024).



Figure 4: Steen, *Merry Company on the Terrace*, 1673-1675, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Merry Company on the Terrace (1673-1675) (Fig. 4) is another of Steen's works which features him and his wife as prominent characters. Steen, true to form, does not present himself in a positive light but does the opposite with gusto. His wife is looking directly at the viewer and reaching for Steen at the far left to recharge her wine glass. Steen himself looks way over-served with a glowing red face and slumped down in his chair. The rest of the entourage is engaged in salacious behavior at best. It is a great indicator that even now in the Netherlands, saying "a household of Jan Steen" is code for domestic chaos.

In *The Effects of Intemperance* (1662) (Fig. 5), Steen shows a wife and mother passed out from drink in midday while her family swirls around her incoherent body taking full advantage of the opportunity. The young son is stealing from her purse as her husband is cavorting with the maid in the garden while other mischievous deeds are on open display. Steen went back to this theme many times but did it in such a gentle way that you sense that he felt empathy for the subjects (Wallentine, 2021).



Figure 5: Steen, *The Effects of Intemperance*, 1662, National Gallery, London.

Frans Hals was one of the preeminent painters of the Dutch Golden Age. His mastery of portrait paintings is well documented, and he had a prodigious career in this genre. He was not at the level of Rembrandt but did carve out a very fine career. He was famous for aggressive, visible brushstrokes and that seems to add to the grittiness of his subjects. In fact, Vincent Van Gogh was a great admirer over two hundred years later and was especially fond of the textured brushstrokes

that so characterized Hals' work; clearly Van Gogh adopted some of that in his own work. Other later admirers include Monet, Manet, and James Whistler (Franits, 2004; Descargues, 2024).



Figure 6: Hals, *The Merry Drinker*, 1628-1630, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Hals' *The Merry Drinker* (1628) (Fig. 6) is an example of his approach to *Merry Company* but it is interesting that it is more like a portrait than a genre painting. Still, it shows a joyous drinking companion seemingly in the midst of toasting his bar mates. You feel as if he has had a few and is earning a bright red face as a result and he seems to be enjoying those that pass by his perch in the local tavern as if every new passerby is the next opportunity to take another toast. So, while it seems like a portrait, you feel interaction just out of frame (Opisane-Kartin).

One thing I like about this piece compared to Steen's is that there seems to be no need by Hals to qualify this man's actions at all. He is merely out at his favorite tavern to be amongst his favorite people and enjoying their company. There is no moralizing of him; just a joyful look into what no doubt is replicated over and over again at that time in the Dutch Republic. These are prosperous times, and they are to be enjoyed. He is not over the top, with the possible exception of his hat which is magnificent, and he is someone you would want to lift a pint with.

It is interesting that Frans Hals gained a reputation for excessive drinking during his life and it is likely that he spent many many hours in taverns running into the very type of person that he painted in this amazing piece. Perhaps that was why he didn't try to send a moral message with his art; he was painting his own lifestyle.

Dirck Hals, Frans' younger brother, was also a *Merry Company* sub-genre painter although he did paint portraits. He has dozens of *Merry Company* pieces to his credit and they were generally benign but attractive pieces. As with his brother Frans, he did not moralize the moment but rather celebrated the wealth of the Dutch merchant class. This seems to be a winning formula for his work (Franits, 2004).

His *Elegant Company Smoking and Drinking in a Renaissance Interior* (1628) (Fig. 7) is just that; more of a detached record of the event and shows no emotion unlike his brother's work. It makes you wonder if he seized upon a pleasant representation of Dutch life for selling his work and churned them out to fill that need of a prosperous public (Franits, 2004; Yood, 1992).



Figure 7: Hals, *Elegant Company Smoking and Drinking in a Renaissance Interior*, 1628, Private Collection.

Adriaen van Ostade was another Dutch genre painter who, during the early stages of his career, concentrated on exaggerated peasant scenes. One of his best characteristics was his ability to show empathy for the plight of the peasant, and indeed gave them dignity and showed joyousness in the



Figure 8: Ostade, *Carousing Peasants in an Interior*, 1638, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

midst of a very hard life. His *Carousing Peasants in an Interior* (Fig. 8), completed in 1638, is a wonderful example of his gentle treatment.

The light is warm and the surroundings are not poor, just sparse. The subjects are drinking and having a good time and are in their element. As with most of the others, there is no moralizing over them lifting their mugs to drink; rather, it is portrayed as a drink well

deserved by a population that received very few comforts. Certainly, those in the upper class looked down upon the peasant class and their crass behavior but, in economic terms, these types of paintings were extremely popular with the middle and merchant class (Franits, 2004).

Adriaen Brouwer, Flemish by birth, was a painter of the lower class, to include soldiers, sailors, and vagabonds, and depicted them engaged in various vices such as smoking, drinking, gambling, and fighting in the dingy taverns of the day. Brouwer frequented such establishments along with some of his artist friends and he and his friends were often depicted in some of his work (Franits, 2004).

Importantly, Brouwer was very involved in a separate, exclusively Dutch Golden Age/Flemish Baroque genre called *Tronie*. *Tronie*, which means “face or expression” in Dutch, was employed by many artists of the period including Johannes Vermeer and Rembrandt, with Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* being the most famous example. It is essentially a study emphasizing an overly expressive face and Brouwer utilized this technique often. The two examples of Brouwer’s work that I selected are an intersection of a drinking scene and the *Tronie* genre although Brouwer produced many during his career (Manioudaki and Ganbold, 2023).



Figure 9: Brouwer, *The Bitter Draught*, 1636-1638, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

The first is a piece called *The Bitter Draught* (1636-1638) (Fig. 9) and apparently shows a peasant, given his clothing, ingesting something foul, perhaps a rotten beer or ale, and reacting with the full emotions of someone at the moment of realization that their taste buds are being assaulted. This is *Tronie* at its finest and you can imagine Brouwer looking at his reflection to create what just this moment would have looked like (Franits, 2004; Manioudaki and Ganbold 2023).

The second example is a self portrait of the artist called *The Smokers* (1636) (Fig. 10). It is a bar scene exactly where Brouwer would have been often, and he is surrounded by his artist friends who have actually been identified. His overly expressive face is comical and yet very appealing and connects you with what kind of reveler he must have been. He is looking right at you and his face is extremely animated.

Perhaps because Brouwer was a heavy drinker, he was never one to moralize his paintings and instead presented a joyous picture of consumption. Not surprisingly, it is suspected that Brouwer died of alcohol abuse at only 32 years old.



Figure 10: Brouwer, *The Smokers*, 1636, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 11: Leyster, *The Jolly Troper*, 1629, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Judith Leyster is the only woman in my group and one of only two women recognized by the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke; an incredible accomplishment, given the day. Her painting of *The Jolly Troper* (1629) (Fig. 11) is one of a jester-like figure finishing off a tankard. This character was well known in Dutch society at the time and his flashing an empty tankard is a signal that the night is over and it is time to go home and sober up; probably a not-so-subtle moral message (Franits, 2004).

Aftermath - Dutch Alchemy: Turning Gold into Lead

The world operates in cycles and certainly the rise and fall of the Dutch Golden Age is no different. Well before the calamitous *Rampjaar* (Disaster Year) of 1672, cracks were showing in the economic construct that had created the artistic explosion. Because of the oversupply of artists and

art being created for this overheated economic boom, many artists supplemented their income through other means. Steen had a brewery and a bar and Vermeer was an art dealer as well as painter and often turned to a wealthy mother-in-law when times were lean. Others decided to leave the profession or marry well. Those like Frans Hals, Rembrandt, and Vermeer were faced with insolvency later in their careers, which was counter to the most basic tenet of Dutch Society, frugality. Frans Hals and Adriaen Brouwer turned heavily to drink; Hals was notorious for this and “filled his neck with drink every night.” Vermeer died from a stroke likely brought on by debt pressure (Sterling, 2015; Janson, 2024; Franits, 2004).

Because art is not a primary necessity, it is especially vulnerable to economic downturn. When France invaded the Dutch Republic in what became known as the Franco-Dutch War in 1672, the Dutch economy was devastated, and the art market collapsed and never really recovered. Art production had already started to slow before this calamitous war partly due to art being a durable asset; painters had to compete with current painters and those that had died but their works remained on the market. Every time an estate sale occurred, those old paintings were back on the market. The war in 1672, and *Rampjaar*, the Disaster Year, were the final blow. Although teetering on total defeat by the French, the Dutch managed to survive but the economic damage was done (Janson, 2024; Franits, 2004; Hagen and Hagen, 2020).

This had a ripple effect on the number of artists that entered into the profession during this period. What had been a profitable endeavor at the beginning of the Golden Age was seen as a tedious existence at best by the 1670s and beyond, so that epicenter of artistic expression diminished greatly in a very short period of time. Other factors included changes in tastes and morality as time moved into the latter part of the 17th century. Society became more strident and didactic in its moral belief structure and thus, what had seemed humorous and clever with its multiple meanings blurring the message, was now thought of as boorish and brutish. All those scenes of peasants, brawling, and drunk, which were “delightful” earlier in the century, were less so now as the upper-class patrons started to demand civility and preferred not to even acknowledge the peasant’s existence. By 1675, the Dutch Golden Age was no more (Janson, 2024; Franits, 2004; Hagen and Hagen, 2020).

Late 19th-Century/Early 20th-Century Europe

Period History and Art Movements

In our interconnected, complex society, significant developments rarely occur in a vacuum. Cause and effect are always in play and so was the case in France in the mid-19th century. The rise of Realism and then Impressionism as art movements occurred amidst these societal, cultural, technological, and political shifts, and I think it is important to understand how these forces shaped art development during this period.

From 1814 to 1870, France was in almost constant political turmoil. There had been five major upheavals of governmental change during this period. It would stand to reason that the average citizen's confidence in governmental institutions was low if not fully shattered. The industrialization of France began late and proceeded so hesitantly that one cannot speak of an "industrial revolution." Because of France's far flung overseas colonies, the capital required to modernize the country was lacking. This was especially evident in the rail sector, and it was not until the 1850s that France possessed an extensive and effective rail network to aide in industrial development of areas outside of Paris.

As industrialization in France finally did progress, one of the "unintended consequences" of that was the reality of a freedom of creation. One of the Industrial Revolution's counterintuitive gifts was that, by mechanization, it multiplied the productivity of human labor and, thus, allowed for a segment of the population not linked to manual labor to turn their talents to artistic expression. In this case, not only were the numbers of those devoting themselves to the arts high but also the skills and intellect were higher in those trending towards cultural production ("Industrial Revolution", 2021).

Another benefit from the industrial revolution was the creation of a prosperous upper, middle, and merchant classes who could afford to be in the art trade and thus created a high demand for art, much as had happened in the Netherlands in the 17th century.

While the industrial surge had some very positive aspects, the reality of life in the working-class industrial world was harsh. The rapid growth of cities and conditions endured by their densely packed inhabitants, especially after transitioning from an agrarian society, was a shocking reality. Their inability to cope took on many forms, one of them being the heavy use of alcohol and

absinthe. As humans tend to do, there was a strong social stratification on economic lines and those economic classes quickly found themselves segregated from each other.

One major technological development that dramatically affected the art world was the invention of the Daguerriotype by Louis Daguerre in the late 1830s. It was the first practical photographic method and revolutionized how painters approached painting. Until the Daguerriotype, the vast majority of painters had sought to create as realistic an image as possible. Once photography appeared, there was a realization by artists that they could not hope to present the world around them more accurately than this new technology. Thus, they grasped that reality was transient since light and colors changed through time. As a result, they began to paint with color, texture, movement, and light, showing the subtle variations in each. Further, they began to deconstruct color and allow for the viewer to reconstruct it with their eyes (Silva, 2022).

Another pair of technological advances that seem to be an afterthought in today's world were the introduction of oil paints in metal tubes and the box/field easel which had a practical and lasting effect on the development and history of art. Until the early 1840s, oil paints had to be prepared at the easel and mixed together to obtain a color. Impressionist painters applied the colors to the canvas in their pure state instead of mixing on a palette creating texture allowing the human eye to "mix" for them. The box easel coupled with the tube paints also allowed for ease of painting in the natural setting instead of in the studio, which provided the true natural light and subsequent natural colors and was a fundamental tenet for Realism and, later, Impressionist painters.

One other event had a profound effect on Paris and those that inhabited it. During the first half of the 19th century, Paris was a dangerous and filthy city, barely changed from medieval times. Narrow dark streets, open sewage, and rampant crime permeated throughout the city. Several devastating epidemics had crippled the city and yet, the population had doubled from 1800 to 1850. Napoleon III came to power in 1848 and shared the vision of his more famous uncle; Paris should be a royal city and so he hired as the new city manager George Eugene Haussmann. Haussmann's tenacity and audacity remade Paris into the city that we see today and required at its height of reconstruction 1,500 architects and 60,000 workers. Haussmann's massive undertakings extended well beyond the creation of large avenues (designed in part to move military hardware), grandiose monuments, and the installation of magnificent parks. It included an efficient sewer system to promote public health which had suffered greatly in the previous Paris cityscape. In twenty-five years, he recreated Paris into an imperial and, more importantly, modern city. It was

this city that became the focus of many Impressionist paintings over the next half century (“Baron Haussmann and the Transformation of Paris”).

Perhaps this is an opportune moment to discuss the various art movements and styles that were in play during the period from 1840s to the 1920s in Europe. It would be convenient if the timeline of these movements and styles were perfectly chronological, but unfortunately this is far from the case. Even more nuanced is what constitutes an art movement and an art style.

An art movement denotes a period of time where cultural or political changes inspired changes in the artistic community, resulting in a collective style or shared way of creating art. An art style is the visual appearance of an artwork that may have been influenced by an art movement but can also be developed independently by the artist. For example, artists have painted with a realistic art style throughout history, but the purpose of the Realist art movement in the 19th century was to represent the lives of common people, rather than the idealized lives of religious figures, aristocrats or social elites. The Realist movement centered around the way in which subjects were presented, rather than ultra realistic appearances (“Art Styles and Art Movements”).

The following are the major art movements during the period between the 1840s and 1920s with a concise definition of each; I have also included notable artists from each movement:

Realism (began 1840s; notable artists: Manet, Millet)

As the name would suggest, Realism portrays the true nature of the world and the human condition enduring that world. Thus, more base colors were used (blacks and browns) and there is a grittiness to the paintings. Realism, which featured peasants and ordinary people, appeared in response to the harsh realities of the Industrial Revolution that was in full swing during this period. Immense social changes and pressures were occurring in society and harsh living conditions in industrial urban centers were becoming the norm (Lesso, 2022).

Impressionism (began 1860s; notable artists: Monet, Degas)

Born from a revolt against the established Académie des Beaux-Arts and its Salon de Paris, Impressionism sought to exploit the nuances of light and color with broad brushstrokes which essentially forced the viewer’s eyes to “mix” the color themselves. In addition, and similar to the

Realists, the artists wanted to paint common people in their environment (Lesso, 2022; Reynolds, 2016).

Post Impressionism (began 1880s; notable artists: Van Gogh, Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec)

There is some debate whether this is a movement at all given that those that are generally assigned to Post Impressionism have styles too dissimilar to and really create more of a personal style (Reynolds, 2016).

Neo Impressionism (began 1880s; notable artist: Seurat)

This too is very loosely described as a movement. In essence, it is a deconstruction of color called pointillism (Reynolds, 2016).

Expressionism (began 1905; notable artists: Munch, Kirchner)

It emphasized the emotional connectivity and angst to art by the artist. There is also a coarseness to these works signifying the “grittiness and reality of life.” As with the other movements, this is a common theme; that of painting the reality of an angst riddled life (Reynolds, 2016).

Cubism (began 1907; notable artists: Picasso, Braque)

Here we have a breakdown of the form and a reconstruction of that three-dimensional form on a flat plane.

Interestingly, Paul Cézanne, primarily a Post Impressionist, is considered the father of Cubism. Even though Cézanne was mainly trying to create volume through color planes, the Cubists saw in Cézanne a tendency to represent nature with geometric shapes, which is central to the early development of Cubism. The Cubists followed Cézanne in breaking the traditional rules of perspective, and then went further by introducing multiple views of the same subject from different perspectives at the same time, which is another feature of their style (Assier, 2015).

It can be said that the onset of the Impressionist movement was consumed with struggle. This struggle was a familiar one of power of the institution against the power of the individual to make their choice. The human condition is littered with these conflicts; the prevailing wisdom hanging desperately onto the power of an institution because they have the “best interests” of the

ideals they embrace at heart. On the other side live those that are at the proverbial palace gates, just as determined but not as well supplied with options. Throughout history, we see these situations and almost always, without fail, the force of constant pressure, sometimes gentle and sometimes not, prevails.

This was the landscape in 1860 when the “radical” artists that would be known as Impressionists repeatedly faced off with France’s Académie des Beaux-Arts whose overarching goal was the protection of French culture and specifically French art. This period was also that of the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in France which saw rapid technological advances and a huge cultural shift in all facets of French society and life. So, change was certainly in the air throughout France except perhaps at the Académie des Beaux-Arts whose charter inherently resisted change (Samu, 2004)

Around 1860, young artists like Pissarro, Monet, and Sisley independently moved to Paris and collected around two studios; Manet arrived a year or so later. Through that chance meeting, these artists formed the core of the initial Impressionist movement. They traded ideas and thoughts on the way ahead for painting and dreamed of making their way in the art world (Reward, 1973).

One of the major canons held dear by the Académie that we had seen at the beginning of the Dutch Golden Age was the concept of hierarchy of art genre. As in the Dutch Republic before the Golden Age, religious, historical, and portrait paintings were most prized for their societal worth and genre, still life, and landscape paintings were not. The Académie des Beaux-Arts still believed in this and was at odds with some of the “radical” painters of the period. The Salon de Paris, the preeminent art show of the day, was the gatekeeper for this system as they either rejected or accepted paintings for display at their show and those artists that were accepted prospered while those that were rejected found life difficult and commissions sparse. As a result, during 1863, those artists that were not accepted by the Académie/Salon held an impromptu alternate exhibition of their own and called it “Salon des Refusés.” The rejections continued and, from 1874 to 1888, eight formal, independent exhibitions were held. This was originally known as the Anonymous Society of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, etc. (“The Lasting Impression of French Impressionism”; Gersh-Nesic, 2019).

Originally, critics applied the term “impressionism” as an insult to the paintings they believed were unfinished or even sloppy. Inspired by a newly rebuilt and modern Paris, discoveries in

science, the burgeoning art of photography, and popular interest in Japanese art, the Impressionists explored radical techniques, capturing colors and moments in time, different points of view, and modern topics (“The Lasting Impression of French Impressionism”).

The first rogue exhibition was held at a former studio of a photographer and while condescendingly was referred to as “Impressionist,” they would not adopt that name until 1877. This was a radical, unprecedented move to display out of the Salon in a promoted show; indeed, it was a turning point in art marketing in the modern era. The 1874 exhibition featured thirty artists including Monet, Degas, Renoir, Pissarro, and Morisot (Gersh-Nesic, 2019; Reward, 1973).

One of the important points of Impressionism, like its Realism cousin and 17th-century genre painters, was to paint life as it occurred, unvarnished and showing scenes of everyday life. One aspect of everyday life in Paris in the second half of the 19th century was the bar and cafe culture. All of the art movements of this period presented many works of this environment and many of this era’s finest artists used the bars and cafes as subjects. One of the things I find fascinating about these works is their treatment of the individual patrons of the bar and how this differs from the 17th-century Dutch Golden Age (Reward, 1973).

Absinthe - The Green Fairy

One wrinkle in the 19th-century bar scene was the addition of the use of absinthe.

Absinthe had been known of since biblical times; indeed, the name seems to have come from the Greek *absinthion*, meaning undrinkable. It was made from wormwood leaves and sometimes had an alcohol content as high as eighty per cent by volume. The “modern” absinthe story began in the 1830s when French troops fighting in Algeria used it as an anti-malarial, mixing it with wine to make it more palatable. They brought their newfound taste for the bitter drink home with them, and it soon became popular, particularly among the Parisian middle class who wanted to align themselves with the prestige of their soldiers. “The Green Hour,” as it came to be known, saw Parisians filling the boulevards, moving from one cafe to the next (Adams, 2005).

Still, even with its perceived ability to enhance creativity, described as a “lucid drunkenness,” absinthe would have most likely stayed in a lesser role to standard alcohol-based drinks like wine and other spirits except for the devastation of the phylloxera infestation of French vineyards whose impact was felt from approximately 1860 to 1900. Absinthe had typically been made of a grape based distillate; with this base spirit also impacted, the makers of absinthe moved to sugar beets to produce the base and quickly became the drink of choice in Europe and especially Paris. It was cheap to make and very available and there was an understanding of an almost narcotic effect (Michalska, 2016; “Absinthe and the arts in 19th-century Paris”, 2018; Johnson and Jancis, 2013).

Artists and writers were especially attracted to this neon green liquid. Vincent Van Gogh was an avid drinker of absinthe and the most famous (along with standard alcohol-based drinks), but he was far from the only artist that imbibed in alcohol and/or absinthe. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec was notorious for his consumption of the *green fairy* and most of the prominent artists of the period were users. Among the writers and even inventors who used absinthe to the extreme were Oscar Wilde, Charles Cros, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Marie Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Guy de Maupassant, Alfred Jarry, and, later, Ernest Hemingway. With the exception of Verlaine (52) and Hemingway (62), all died before their 50th birthday (Marschner).

The Artists

I have selected six 19th/20th-century artists to present the prevailing views of alcohol consumption in Europe at that time. They are in order of presentation Manet, Degas, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Munch, and Picasso, and span the movements from Realism to Cubism. Their art reflects social pressures in play as Europe moved rapidly towards industrialization and faced the unintended social consequences of that “economic progress.”

Born in Paris on January 23, 1832, Édouard Manet’s family was affluent and well connected and they hoped their son would choose a respectable career as a naval officer, but Manet had a dream to become an artist and refused. His father, ever fearful that his family’s prestige would be tarnished, continued to present Manet with more “appropriate” options. In 1849, after a year on a Navy vessel, Manet returned and promptly failed his naval examinations. After several

more failures, Manet's parents finally relented and supported his desire of attending art school (Courthion, 2024).

After six years as a student, Manet finally opened his own studio. His painting *The Absinthe Drinker* is a fine example of Realism, which was in vogue at that time. Despite his success with Realism, Manet began to entertain a looser, more "Impressionist" style. Using broad brushstrokes, he chose as his subjects everyday people engaged in everyday tasks. His canvases were populated by singers, street people, gypsies, and beggars. This unconventional focus combined with a mature knowledge of the old masters startled some and impressed others (Attardo).

Manet can be seen as a transitory painter. He was caught in between Realism and Impressionism and thus, for his generational peers, he was too progressive, while for young painters he was too traditional. From the Impressionists, he took a penchant for displaying reality using long expressive brush strokes, studying objects in the open air, and concentrating on working with light and color. Unlike the Impressionists, he did not give up black colors, contours, and classical composition, and did not want to be grouped with the Impressionists. His desire was to be independent of any labels.



Figure 12: Manet, *The Absinthe Drinker*, 1859, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

The Absinthe Drinker (Fig. 12) was painted by Manet in 1859 and was his first entry into the Salon competition. It is curious that the only vote for Manet's *The Absinthe Drinker* was from the elderly master painter, Eugène Delacroix. Manet's choice of the rag-picker, striking a defiant, proud pose, drunk on absinthe, a discarded bottle at his feet and roaming the streets for scraps in modern and beautiful Paris, just a few short years after the beginning of its transformation by Haussmann likely, did not sit well with the Salon. It was Manet reminding the establishment that while the city had been restructured and made elegant and "imperial," there was a class of people still inhabiting Paris that represented the gritty underbelly that had not been reached and scrubbed clean. This was the face of the modern city that most wanted to forget (Abrahams, 2010a; Lajer-Burcharth, 1985).

A Bar at the Folies Bergère (Fig. 13) painted in 1882 by an ailing Manet was his last important art piece before he died in 1883 and was exhibited at the Salon later that year. The barmaid, who was a woman known to Manet named Suzon, was probably also a prostitute which was common at Folies Bergère nightclub. Suzon occupies the center of the frame and as she leans on the marble bar, she is offered up as another possible commodity to be chosen for purchase along with the liqueurs, champagne, wine, Bass Ale, and other libations. Her face has a sadness to it; a tiredness as this is just another night and another customer in a lifetime of customers.



Figure 13: Manet, *A Bar at the Folies Bergère*, 1882, Courtauld Gallery, London.

The painting is interesting for many other reasons, one being the unusual perspective. She is looking directly at you as you look at the painting as if you are the customer. However, off to the right in the reflection in the mirror you see the back of her body and the actual customer's face. In essence, the viewer becomes the customer; it is thought that this was actually a self portrait of Manet. While she is upright and blank-faced in front of us, in the reflection she seems to be leaning

forward towards the man, perhaps flirting. From the reflection in the painting, Folies Bergère nightclub offered many delights to its patrons; a balcony full of well-dressed customers watching a trapeze act, visible as legs on the left. This is a place to be seen and entertained and was a popular venue for the growing middle class enjoying all the possible pleasures of life that their disposable income would allow. Manet frequented Folies Bergère often and it was one of the most popular music halls in Paris. With Suzon at the bar, Manet reminds us that for every entertainment, there must be a part of the population to offer that entertainment; the tired, blank, worn-out face. That Suzon was a real person, well known to him, makes it that much more intimate (Gulizzi, 2016; “A Bar at the Folies Bergère”; Abrahams, 2010b; Wallentine, 2021).

Born in Paris in 1834 to a French father and Creole mother from New Orleans, Edgar Degas’ upbringing was comfortable much like Manet. It was hoped by his parents that he become lawyer as his father was but again, like Manet, he had other plans. He started his artist career as a history painter but, along with many other young painters of his generation, he drifted towards Realism and then Impressionism. He vigorously disliked the label of Impressionism but he did take part in the eight Impressionist Art Shows from 1874 to 1886 along with Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, and Morisot (Gersh-Nesic, 2019; Kendall, 2024).



Figure 14: Degas, *The Absinthe Drinker*, 1876, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

In 1876, Degas painted *The Absinthe Drinker* (Fig. 14). Degas was certainly a user of absinthe but it is unclear whether he was a notable abuser of the green liquid like so many in the art and writing community. This painting was originally called *In the Cafe* and was shown at the second Impressionist Exhibition and was not well received. It was again displayed in England in 1893 and retitled *L’Aperitif* and was deemed morally corrupt by the English, perhaps because of their aversion to anything French; certainly, the glass of absinthe in the painting “screamed” French. Eventually it was sold to the Louvre in the early 1900s and renamed once again, this time *L’Absinthe*. The individuals in the painting

were known to Degas and they had agreed to pose for it. They were Ellen Andrée and Marcellin Desboutin. She was a well-known and attractive actress and had posed for Degas and Renoir previously. Degas requested that she present a somewhat ugly, immensely tired expression, and disheveled dress. Nothing extra was required of Mr. Desboutin; he was a well-known alcoholic engraver, and his face shows the wear and tear of overindulgence. She has a drooping, self-absorbed air about her, while he is leaning forward and looking away; the couple are meant to be perceived as together but there is no intimacy between them as they stare blankly out in front of them. They are deliberately positioned at an angle to accentuate this forward stare; he, the victim of alcohol abuse, and she lost in her pale green absinthe fog and ready to feed her habit with a carafe and glass of absinthe. This painting was meant to send a moral message about the evils of overindulgence, in this case, alcohol and especially absinthe. Interestingly, the characterizations were so believable by Degas' presentation of these two real people that he had to offer a public statement that they were indeed not alcoholics ("Absinthe by Edgar Degas: Interpretation of Impressionist Genre Painting"; "Absinthe and the arts", 2018; Michalska, 2016).

The oldest son of six children of a Protestant Pastor, Vincent van Gogh was born and raised in the Brabant region of southern Netherlands in 1853. He apprenticed at age sixteen for seven years at an art dealer in The Hague and later in London. While this was his first exposure to the fine art world, he was not fond of art dealing and left the firm and took several odd jobs including evangelist, book dealer, and missionary, the latter of which he was fired from. In 1870, in despair over his failures, he turned to drawing and his artistic talents were realized. Over the course of the next ten years, he produced all of his prodigious artworks, mostly unknown to the world. As he progressed through this decade, his fragile mental state became apparent and he was helped by his brother, Theo, to try and regain his mental and physical health. He eventually settled in Arles in 1888 to find some sense of calm in his chaotic world. He would be there two years and would produce an incredible array of artwork in between serious bouts of mental illness. It was here that he lived with Paul Gauguin for a time before Gauguin left after Van Gogh sliced off part of his ear and gave it to a prostitute. It was as if he understood that he was short-lived for this world and so he produced as maniacally as he indeed was. Van Gogh committed suicide in July of 1890 of a self-inflicted gunshot wound (Blok, 2024).

Van Gogh possessed an incredibly addictive personality and there seems to be little that he wasn't willing to try to alter his reality and dull the pain of his mental health issues. His consumption of absinthe was as much as five liters per day which is a phenomenal amount to function under; it is thought that this is why so many of his paintings, especially in his last two years, have strong yellow undertones. Additionally, he was also extremely addicted to wine and consumed prodigious amounts on a daily basis. Leaving no proverbial stone unturned, he was also a heavy smoker of standard tobacco and hashish. While his addiction to smoking, alcohol, and absinthe were widely known, there is also evidence that he may have had an affinity for items with the chemical compound of terpenes. Terpenes are a class of compounds found in aromatic plants and are associated with wormwood extract in absinthe. They are also found in paint, turpentine, and camphor and it is surmised that Van Gogh consumed all three regularly. That would line up with the symptoms he experienced late in his short life, specifically stomach and nervous system issues. He had four of these episodes during the last eighteen months of his life before he finally committed suicide (“Why Van Gogh Ate Paint”, 1988; Cotton, 2011; Isenberg, 1988; Roginsky, High, Morrill and Fortenberry, 2020).

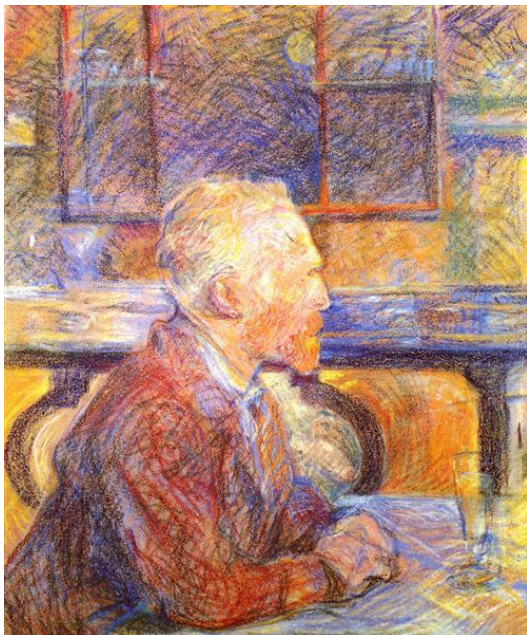
Café Table with Absinthe (Fig. 15) was painted in 1887 while Van Gogh was living in Paris with his brother Theo. Van Gogh making this a subject of one of his paintings gives you some indication of his inclination for the *green fairy*, as absinthe was referred at the time; it certainly presents a very lonely, stark visual. While he was a frequent user as were Manet, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, and many other artists and writers in Paris at that time, and Degas, in particular, painted on the abuse of alcohol and absinthe, there seems to be little moral stigma associated with this painting by Van Gogh.



Figure 15: Van Gogh, *Café Table with Absinthe*, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

To have so many addictions in common, it is somewhat astounding how different Henri Toulouse-Lautrec and Vincent Van Gogh were. While van Gogh was the ultimate loner and an intense, introspective soul, Toulouse-Lautrec was a social animal and loved nothing more than to frequent the bars, cafes, and brothels of Paris. Born in the south of France into an aristocratic family, he broke both his legs in his early teens, unfortunately they healed improperly which caused them to stop growing while his torso continued to develop creating a very unusual appearance. There were also genetic issues in the family and his parents were first cousins which likely contributed to a series of genetic maladies that afflicted him and his siblings (Michael, 2000; “Toulouse Lautrec Biography”).

In 1882, he moved to Paris and studied art starting off as a poster artist and is well known to the day for his creative abilities in this genre. His self-deprecating humor and penchant for alcohol made him a popular figure in the art community as well as the cabaret crowd. His paintings concentrated on cabarets, bars, and brothels and he was well known for painting scenes from these venues at tables within them with friends around him as he worked and drank prodigiously. He was legendarily fond of absinthe and was an alcoholic for much of his adult life and has been attributed to the invention of a legendary drink called “Tremblement de Terre” or Earthquake Cocktail, containing half absinthe and half Cognac on ice; the name “Earthquake” was apparently appropriate (Michael, 2000; “Toulouse Lautrec Biography”; “Toulouse-Lautrec”).



Portrait of Vincent Van Gogh (Fig. 16), completed in 1887, is a pastel on paper rendering of what was likely a daily occurrence in the life of Van Gogh wrapping up the day with absinthe and brandies in quick succession. It is one of the very few portraits of Van Gogh and is also thought to be the only pastel that Toulouse-Lautrec created in his career. In truth, when I first saw it, I thought it was a self portrait by Van Gogh as their styles are known to be similar due to their time together when they were training in the same studio as new artists.

Figure 16: Toulouse-Lautrec, *Portrait of Vincent Van Gogh*, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Toulouse-Lautrec was adept at choosing a setting that reflected the personality of his model. In the case of Van Gogh, it seems he found the cafe to be a fitting backdrop for his friend. The choice is not surprising considering that in Paris, Van Gogh had developed a routine of hastening to a cafe at the end of his workday during the so-called *heure verte*, or “green hour,” to imbibe one or more glasses of absinthe. The subject of alcohol consumption was of particular artistic interest to both painters. Toulouse-Lautrec, who himself suffered from alcoholism, had been exploring the naturalistic theme of the solitary drinker for some time in his art, in particular the stereotypical destitute woman whose drinking led to a life of rack and ruin. His role models, Degas, Jean-François Raffaelli and Jean-Louis Forain (1852-1931), who had already frequently depicted the excessive drinking of the Parisian underclass in their paintings and prints, further had inspired him to do so. Toulouse-Lautrec’s portrait of his friend Van Gogh appears to fit seamlessly into this tradition (Blok, 2024).

Painted in 1886, *At Gennelle Absinthe Drinker* (Fig. 17) is that stereotypical solitary, destitute woman who is drinking her life away, as mentioned above. The blank stare and single-minded desire to feed her absinthe habit is on full display. It is interesting that if Toulouse-Lautrec could have seen himself, he would have seen the same desperate look on his own face (Blok, 2024).

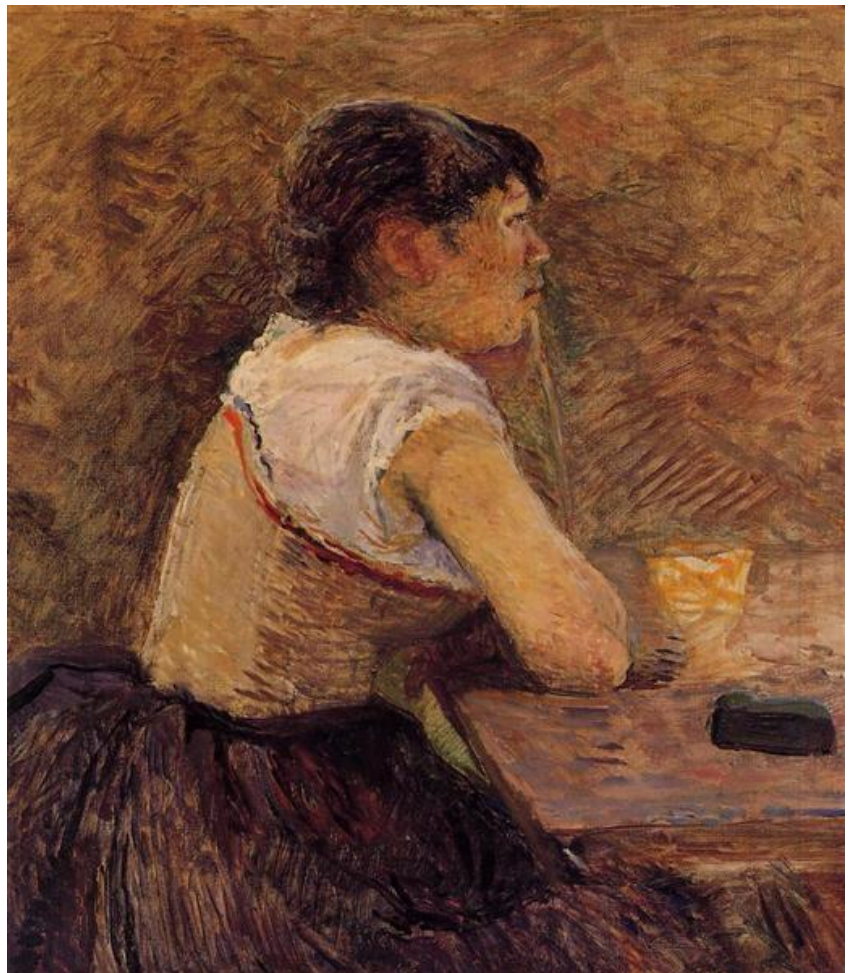


Figure 17: Toulouse-Lautrec, *At Gennelle Absinthe Drinker*, 1886, Private Collection.

The intriguing painting of *Monsieur Boileau at the Cafe* (Fig. 18) was painted in 1893 and speaks to the lifestyle that Toulouse-Lautrec aspired to and clearly attained during his short but colorful life. In the painting, Monsieur Boileau leans back in his chair exposing his portly body in a self-satisfied manner with an expression of impending drunkenness; his eye lids dropping down across his eyes further as the night moves towards morning. He seems like he is in deep, foggy thought over whether to go for another well before the incandescent green glass of absinthe is even half empty. You just know he will. This is a classic Toulouse-Lautrec scene of new wealth enjoying all the fruits of their recent bump in status without regard to tomorrow; much like the artist himself. In fact, this was true of many artists and writers during these years in Paris; Toulouse-Lautrec's early demise, at 36, was certainly hastened by the green fairy although it was assisted by a debilitating case of syphilis. Monsieur Boileau seems to be heading down the same road as the artist and certainly is earning the descriptor "all speed, no brakes" (Gurney, 2023; Werner, 2020).

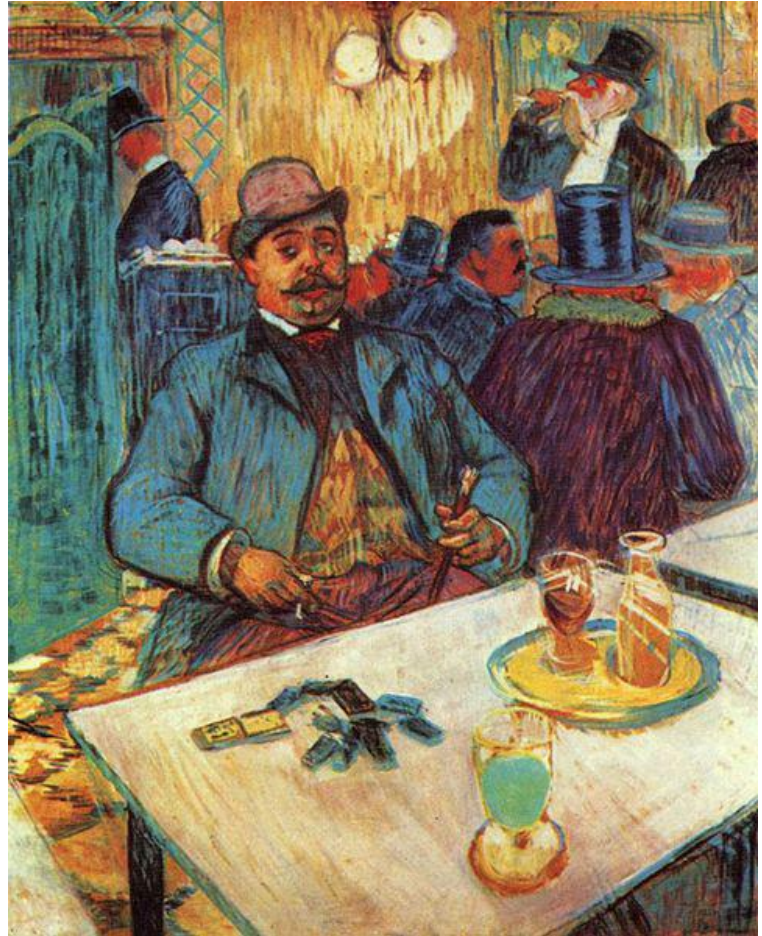


Figure 18: Toulouse-Lautrec, *Monsieur Boileau at the Café*, 1893, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.

Edvard Munch was born in 1864 in a farming area just north of Kristiania (future Oslo) into a middle-class family. His family was plagued with maladies; his mother, father and two of three siblings died during his youth and his surviving sister developed mental illness. "Illness, insanity, and death," as he said, "were the black angels that kept watch over my cradle and accompanied me all my life" (Watson, 2024).

He began his artistic career as a Naturalist after he moved to Kristiania but quickly drifted to Impressionism after a trip to Paris in 1889. He met both Paul Gauguin and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec during this trip and evolved towards a Post Impressionist style utilizing broad brushstrokes and Gauguin's bounding line style (Watson, 2024).

Expressionism can be said to have begun in 1905 and lasted until 1920 at the the end of the First World War. As the opposite of Impressionism, it presents art as highly subjective, personal, spontaneous self-expression, and features distortion, exaggeration, and primitivism. Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Munch have all been referred to as "fathers" of Expressionism, but Munch is unique that he both inspired and participated in the movement. The main difference between impressionism and expressionism is that impressionism captures the essence of a scene through careful use of light while expressionism uses vivid colors to convey the artist's subjective emotional response to that object (Watson, 2024; Lloyd, 2016)

Munch's style seems to reflect his tragic youth and his fatalism as a result. His most famous work, *The Scream*, variations of which he executed twice in 1893, once in 1895 and again in 1910. It perfectly depicts an angst riddled person, at the height of their panic and was thought to represent nature screaming (Watson, 2024; Ohlsen 2016; Roginsky, High, Morrill and Fortenberry, 2020).



Figure 19: Munch, *Self Portrait with Bottle of Wine*, 1906, Munch Museum, Oslo.

The Self Portrait with Bottle of Wine (Fig. 19), painted in 1906, shows Munch alone in a restaurant with only faceless people in the background. He is in the center of the frame but his posture is hunched over, so it visually pushes him downward and his hands are passively placed in his lap which makes him look defeated. At this period of his life, he was acutely alcohol dependent, and he suffered a nervous breakdown just three years later. Although he produced over 200 self-portraits during his long career,

he rarely exhibited them. However, he displayed this particular piece over thirteen times from 1906

to 1914. That it reveals his persona as frail, defeated, passive, and dependent on alcohol is a testament to how he must have felt at this time of his life and how he wanted to be presented to the public (Berman, 2016; Watson, 2024).

Pablo Ruiz was born in Malaga, Spain in 1881 and spent his youth in Madrid and Barcelona. His father was a drawing teacher and Pablo showed an affinity for drawing at an early age and studied under his father. He had his first exhibition at age 13 and after the family moved to Barcelona, where his father took a position at a local art academy, Pablo enrolled in the academy and continued his training. The family assumed he would become an art academic like his father but he decided to chart a different course for himself. In 1897 he moved to Madrid and studied in a well-known art academy but quickly tired of the classic instruction and started observing and drawing scenes in the capital including street scenes, cafes, and brothels. After a year of illness, he returned to Barcelona. Interestingly, he began to use his mother's surname, Picasso, and eventually shortened his name to just Picasso. As he said later in his life, "My mother said to me, 'If you are a soldier, you will become a general. If you are a monk, you will become the Pope.' Instead, I was a painter, and became Picasso" (Conrad III, 1988; Bernardi, 2023; McCully, 2024; "Pablo Picasso Bio").

In 1900, he set off to Paris with a close artist friend named Carlos Casagemas to experience the artistic culture and see his own work which was being exhibited there. While there, he reveled in the vibrant colors of Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec among others and it changed the way he utilized color. He returned to Malaga with Casagemas who was distraught over a lost love affair; after some time in Malaga, he travelled to Madrid without Casagemas. While Picasso was in Madrid, Casagemas returned to Paris in early 1901 and attempted to shoot his ex-lover before eventually shooting himself in the back room of a wine shop. This tragedy initiates the "Blue Period" of Picasso's art as he was distraught over the loss of his best friend and the guilt that he had abandoned Casagemas. Picasso produced a series of graphic paintings to commemorate the suicide of Casagemas and worked almost exclusively in blue and green tones from 1901 to 1904 (Conrad III, 1988; Bernardi, 2023; McCully, 2024; "Pablo Picasso Bio").

It is in this period that the majority of his paintings featuring absinthe occur and those blue and green tones of this period are the colors of absinthe. Picasso was not a strong consumer of absinthe, but he had partaken of it during his life. He was, however, fascinated with the world of

absinthe and of Paris and this counterculture offshoot; the brothels, bars, and cafes where absinthe and humans were abused. Four of Picasso's absinthe paintings were completed during this period and all of them show a psychological portrait of addiction. The users are broken and blank and all of his subjects are women with one notable exception, *The Absinthe Drinker - Portrait of Angel Fernández de Soto*, produced in 1903 (Conrad III, 1988; Bernardi, 2023).

Buveuse d'absinthe (1901) (Fig. 20) marks the transition to the Blue Period; the suicide of his painter friend Carlos Casagemas seemingly caused Picasso to suddenly awake from the intoxication of Parisian pleasures to a harsh reality. The individual fields of color are clearly demarcated by black lines, in the style of Paul Gauguin, which Picasso encountered for the first time in 1900. The woman depicted belongs to the Paris *demimonde*, a 19th-century class of French women considered to be of doubtful morality and social standing which was a source of inspiration to Picasso and other artists. The absinthe drinker is rendered in terms that starkly emphasize the wretchedness of her condition. The hunched, solitary



Figure 20: Picasso, *Buveuse d'absinthe*, 1901, Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.

figure is sequestered in a corner of the room and isolated from her surroundings with her gaze directed into space. She exemplifies a series of depictions of female alcoholics by Picasso and the scene has an atmosphere of melancholy, remoteness, and addiction-related isolation (Bernardi, 2023).

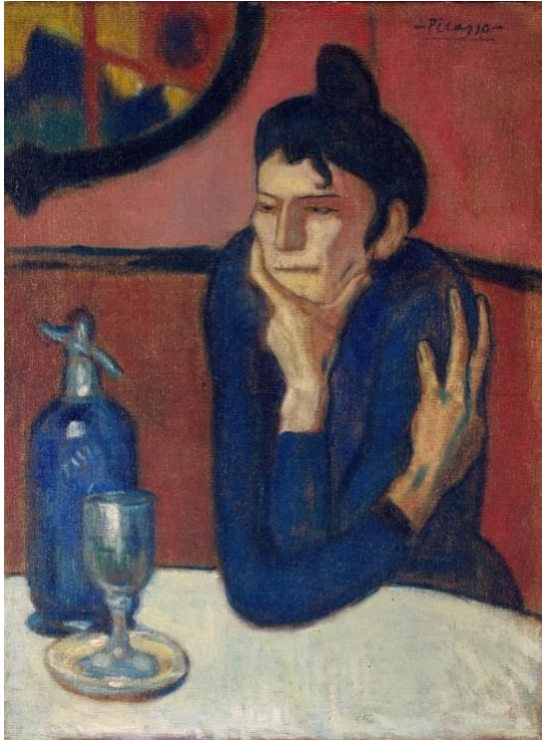


Figure 21: Picasso, *Woman Drinking Absinthe*, 1901, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

Picasso's *Woman Drinking Absinthe* (Fig. 21), also from 1901, is an intensely psychological picture of a person under the influence of alcohol. The long arms and sinewy hands enfold her meager body while her eyes glow with what may be carnal contemplation. In the mirror behind, the images of the outside world flatten and change form. With the exception of Degas's *L'Absinthe*, most of the early depictions of absinthe drinkers were male; the exceptions were advertising posters of coy maidens proffering a healthy elixir. But by the end of the 19th century, absinthe pictures showed a growing number of women, and they were no longer depicted as healthy, happy, or virtuous. Doctors and social observers alike saw absinthe as a vice peculiarly attractive to women.

As one absinthe expert, Dr. J.A. Labored, wrote in 1903,

Woman have a particular taste for absinthe and if she intoxicates herself rarely with wine and alcohol, it has to be recognized that in Paris at least, she is frequently attracted to *les apéritifs* and, without risk of exaggeration, I would say that this intoxication has been for several years as common among women as among men. It is possible to state that the clear cases of chronic absinthism occur in a woman at the end of eight months to a year.

In Picasso's other paintings of this time, like *The absinthe drinker* (1901) (Fig. 22), gaunt prostitutes and idle dandies stare out at the world with glazed eyes set in a pallid, bloodless face, as if overcome by the experience of city life. Unlike Degas's *L'Absinthe*, Picasso's paintings are no longer "a slice of life" but seem to express the emotional world within the artist (Conrad III, 1988, pp. 79-80; Adams, 1980).



Figure 22: Picasso, *The Absinthe Drinker*, 1901, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Picasso's friend Angel Fernández de Soto is depicted in his 1903 painting *The Absinthe Drinker - Portrait of Angel Fernández de Soto* (Fig. 23). The green in the glass identifies the absinthe, of which de Soto was very fond. He and Picasso were close friends as young men and were very visible during Picasso's Blue Period years in Barcelona.



Figure 23: Picasso, *The Absinthe Drinker - Portrait of Angel Fernández de Soto*, 1903, Private Collection.

This is clear in this portrait of his friend Angel in the dominant colors, the ashen skin, the elongated features and hands and even the theme of absinthe hinted at by the curl of green paint in the glass. Picasso is presenting Angel as a dissipated flaneur, and also as a visionary seeking inspiration through his pipe and glass. Picasso's Blue Period resulted in a string of masterpieces, many of them with the absinthe theme and they depicted human misery in a new, essentially expressionistic manner (Bertazzoni, 2010).

As quickly as the Blue Period began in 1901 with the suicide of Carlos Casagemas it ended, and Picasso began the brighter, more festive "Pink Period." This was brought on by travels to Paris in the latter half of 1904 and a love affair and also his integration in a circle of artists, poets, and authors including Gertrude Stein. Two years later, his art would take a dramatic change with the beginning of Cubism which he founded with artist Georges Braque (Conrad III, 1988).

Picasso embarked on a radical concept of Cubism; essentially reducing three-dimensional space to two dimensions. The period of Cubism began for Picasso in 1907 and went until 1914. During that period, Picasso executed three major absinthe themed works. One was a painting known as *The Glass of Absinthe* (1911) (Fig. 24) and he followed that up with the painting *Bottle of Pernod and Glass* (1912) (Fig. 25) and the sculpture also known as *The Glass of Absinthe* (1914)

(Fig. 26). The sculpture would be his last great work of art inspired by absinthe and within six months of its completion, absinthe would be banned in France (Conrad III, 1988).



Figure 25: Picasso, *The Glass of Absinthe*, 1911, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin.

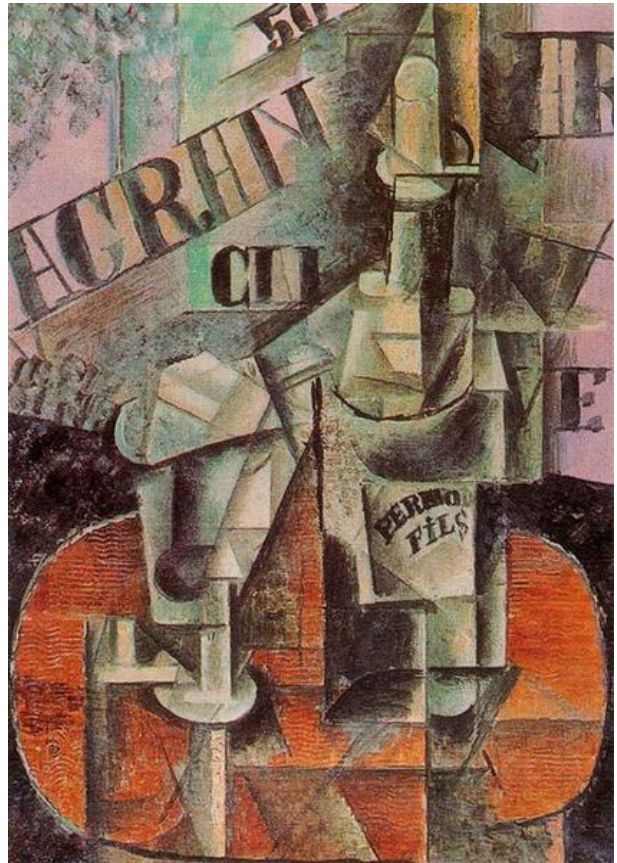


Figure 24: Picasso, *Table in a Cafe (Bottle of Pernod)*, 1912, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



Figure 26: Picasso, *Glass of Absinthe*, 1914, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In the painting *The Glass of Absinthe* (1911), objects appear to be drawn from multiple viewpoints and the glass is flattened with spoon and sugar cube (symbolizing absinthe preparation) floating above it. On his cubist style, he once said, “I put all the things I like into my pictures. Too bad for the things, they just have to put up with it” (Conrad III, 1988, p. 81).

Aftermath: “You Never Want a Serious Crisis to Go to Waste”

This exceedingly cynical pearl of political wisdom is often attributed to Winston Churchill and it does sound like something he would have said but it is actually from Rahm Emanuel, chief of staff to former United States President, Barack Obama, who said it about the global financial crisis in 2008. While Mr. Emanuel might have been the first to verbalize this phrase, it is likely that this strategy is as old as time.

And so it was with absinthe in Europe as the 19th century came to a close. Absinthe had become popular on the backs of the crippled French wine industry, reeling from the Phylloxera outbreak almost a half century earlier. It was easy to make, cheap to produce, and without wine, or at least at an exceedingly lower supply, the use of absinthe flourished and it became the most popular aperitif in France; consumption had risen from just over 15,000 hectoliters in 1875 to almost 240,000 hectoliters in 1913 (Prestwich, 1979; Toner, 2021).

In parallel with the reemergence of the wine industry in France, the Temperance Movement was gaining steam as well. As a subject for clinical study, alcoholism is a mid-19th-century phenomenon. The number of cafes and commercial brands of liquor burgeoned in response to the new pressures of daily life in the Industrial Age. Drinking can break down proletarian solidarity, though, and in 1905, *La Revue Socialiste* published an article warning against the alienating effect of absinth in particular. Since alcoholism was considered to cause hereditary psychological defects, and thus, producing criminals and half-wits, it was feared that it endangered France’s future national strength. By 1910 a French National League Against Alcoholism was in full swing with poster campaigns in schools, and absinth was regularly featured in the posters’ roster of alcoholic evils. A series of turn-of-the-century postcards, published by the French National League Against Alcoholism, chronicled the decline and fall of a worker who succumbed to absinth (Adams, 1980).

Social and political change often hinges on one pivotal event; the proverbial “tipping point.” In 1905, a French laborer living in Switzerland, Jean Lanfray, decided to go on a drunken bender, consuming prodigious amounts of wine and a much lesser amount of absinthe. In his drunken madness, he killed his pregnant wife and two children. That the investigation showed that he only had two drinks of absinthe had little effect on the horror over this tragedy and its negative

association with absinthe. As I mentioned earlier about “never letting a serious crisis go to waste,” the Temperance Movement and the French Wine Industry became ironic bedfellows and seized on the opportunity to exploit the situation. The Lanfray tragedy led to a ban of absinthe in Switzerland in 1908 and it was banned in France in 1914. The Temperance Movement got its victory although absinthe had served only as a sacrificial lamb and no other form of alcohol was banned in France. The wine industry successfully exercised its considerable political clout to regain its market share, that had been lost to phylloxera, and was never taken off the shelves in France (Adams, 1980; Prestwich, 1979; DeSalle and Tattersall, 2022; Gershon, 2019; Munholland, 2015).

Final Conclusions

In the 200 years from the Dutch Golden Age to the late 19th century/early 20th century, the plight of mankind changed dramatically. While the Dutch were considered a fairly urbanized culture, their representative cities of The Hague, Amsterdam, and Delft were no where near the scale of a Paris, London, Madrid, or Barcelona just 200 years later. Further, the economies of these two eras were vastly different. While the Dutch were adept at worldwide trade and were considered the apex of the world economy at the time because of it, they were still an agrarian economy with cottage-based industries. As a contrast, by the mid-19th century, the Industrial Age was in full swing bringing great wealth to those who owned the capital but little or nothing past subsistence to most of those who toiled in it. Those workers, often huddled in hastily constructed tenements in poorly planned cities with little or no infrastructure to provide comfort, felt the full brunt of overcrowding and inhumane conditions that characterized the formative years of the industrial age.

Even before the Dutch had exited the Eighty Years' War and created the new Dutch Republic, they were beginning to establish a society that reflected the ideals of their newfound freedom from authoritarian rule from Spain and the Hapsburg. They created a minimalist government which valued citizen self rule and their church, Reformed Dutch, based on Calvinist doctrine, reinforced thriftiness and fiscal responsibility along with personal freedom which extended even to their female population, a radical idea at the time. These tenets along with the immense patriotism and pride that came with the formation of the new Dutch Republic and their unique place in the middle of the trading world, created an extreme bubble of wealth for their middle and merchant classes that had never been there before. With all this positivity and prosperity and Dutch Calvinist doctrine banning religious decoration in their churches, artists of that era created the genre painting which reveled in all things Dutch. All aspects of Dutch life were glorified whether it be the civil institutions or everyday life in the prosperous Republic. And while, as a result, there were social foibles on display, it was most often presented with tongue affixed firmly in cheek. Jan Steen and his paintings representing his likeness and that of his wife in scenes of domestic disarray like the *The Dissolute Household* (1663-1664), are a perfect example of this. While he is pointing out how not to live, he and his wife are in the very painting that he is teaching the lesson from; essentially making a lighthearted joke of the drunken scene of which he is a jovial participant.

Contrast this with the mid-19th century and early 20th century in Europe and a very different view of alcohol and drunkenness emerges. The first half of the 19th century in France is one of turmoil and instability, and five major political changes in the government occurred from 1800 to 1870 culminating with the disastrous Franco-Prussian War. During that period, the art environment was no different and shifted just as dramatically. The Neoclassicism of David and the Romanticism of Delacroix gave way to the Realism of Manet and Millet and eventually to the Impressionists. Especially with respect to Realism and Impressionism, the depiction of everyday life across all socioeconomic groups brought into view the sometimes sordid world of cafes, bars, and brothels; in fact, these were sometimes all in the same location. Coupled with the immense social change initiated by the Industrial Revolution, the very real human costs came into full view in the art of the late 19th century and early 20th century.

Unlike the Dutch Golden Age genre paintings, which were full of optimism, proud nationalism, and humor with alcohol playing a coincidental role, the late 19th- and early 20th-century art movements revealed the newly realized toll that this more urban, industrial, harsh environment was exacting from its participants who, as a result, used alcohol as an escape from the inhuman conditions and newfound pressures. It is interesting that all the artists I cited during this period were users of absinthe as was the case with many other prominent artists and writers of this period. Ironically, the two artists that presented the abuse of alcohol and absinthe in the best possible light, Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, were the two most devastated by absinthe in their own lives, dying at 37 and 36, respectively, largely as a result of their abuse of the drink.

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Fig. 16: Toulouse-Lautrec, *Portrait of Vincent Van Gogh*, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.
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Fig. 17: Toulouse-Lautrec, *At Gennelle Absinthe Drinker*, 1886, Private Collection.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/henri-de-toulouse-lautrec/at-gennelle-absinthe-drinker-1886>

Fig. 18: Toulouse-Lautrec, *Monsieur Boileau at the Café*, 1893, Cleveland Museum of Art.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/henri-de-toulouse-lautrec/monsieur-boileau-1893>

Fig. 19: Munch, *Self Portrait with Bottle of Wine*, 1906, Munch Museum, Oslo.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/edvard-munch/self-portrait-with-bottle-of-wine-1906>

Fig. 20: Picasso, *Buveuse d'absinth*, 1901, Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.
[https://sammlungonline.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultDetailView/result.inline.list.t1.collection_list.\\$TspTitleLink.link&sp=13&sp=Sartist&sp=SfilterDefinition&sp=0&sp=2&sp=1&sp=SdetailView&sp=65&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=T&sp=0&sp=SdetailList&sp=0&sp=F&sp=Scollection&sp=115150](https://sammlungonline.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultDetailView/result.inline.list.t1.collection_list.$TspTitleLink.link&sp=13&sp=Sartist&sp=SfilterDefinition&sp=0&sp=2&sp=1&sp=SdetailView&sp=65&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=T&sp=0&sp=SdetailList&sp=0&sp=F&sp=Scollection&sp=115150)

Fig. 21: Picasso, *Woman Drinking Absinthe*, 1901, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/pablo-picasso/the-absinthe-drinker-1901>

Fig. 22: Picasso, *The absinthe drinker*, 1901, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/pablo-picasso/the-absinthe-drinker-1901-1>

Fig. 23: Picasso, *The Absinthe Drinker - Portrait of Angel Fernández de Soto*, 1903, Private Collection.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/pablo-picasso/the-absinthe-drinker-portrait-of-angel-fernandez-de-soto-1903>

Fig. 24: Picasso, *The Glass of Absinthe*, 1911, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin.
<https://allenartcollection.oberlin.edu/objects/12237/glass-of-absinthe?ctx=513acfbad4301b675ac46496be0d7ebda5153c66&idx=19>

Fig. 25: Picasso, *Table in a Cafe (Bottle of Pernod)*, 1912, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/pablo-picasso/table-in-a-cafe-bottle-of-pernod-1912>

Fig. 26: Picasso, *Glass of Absinthe*, 1914, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/pablo-picasso/a-glass-of-absinthe-1914>