

RENOIR AT THE THEATRE **Looking at 'La Loge'**

Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *La Loge* (The Theatre Box), 1874, is one of the masterpieces of Impressionism and a major highlight of The Courtauld Gallery's collection. Its depiction of an elegant couple on display in a loge, or box at the theatre, epitomises the Impressionists' interest in the spectacle of modern life. In celebration of The Courtauld Institute of Art's 75th anniversary the exhibition ***Renoir at the Theatre: Looking at 'La Loge'***, on view from **21 February to 25 May 2008**, unites *La Loge* for the first time with Renoir's other treatments of the subject and loge paintings by contemporaries, including Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas. Concentrating on the early years of Impressionism during the 1870s, the exhibition explores how these artists used the loge to capture the excitement and changing nature of fashionable Parisian society.

La Loge (fig. 1) was Renoir's principal exhibit in the first Impressionist exhibition in Paris in 1874. The complexity of its subject matter and its virtuoso technique helped to establish the artist's reputation as one of the leaders of this radical new movement in French art. Renoir's brother Edmond and Nini Lopez, a model from Montmartre known as 'Fish-face', posed for this ambitious composition. At the heart of the painting is the complex play of gazes enacted by these two figures seated in a theatre box. The elegantly dressed woman lowers her opera glasses, revealing herself to admirers in the theatre, whilst her male companion trains his gaze elsewhere in the audience. In turning away from the performance, Renoir focused instead upon the theatre as a social stage where status and relationships were on public display.

Theatre in Paris was a rapidly expanding industry during the 19th century, dominating the cultural life of the city. At the time of *La Loge* it was estimated that over 200,000 theatre tickets were sold every week in Paris. Theatres ranged from the popular variety act venues to the fashionable elegance of the great opera houses. The burgeoning wealth of the middle classes meant that the loges of the premier theatres were no longer the preserve of high society. From the 1830s onwards celebrated caricaturists such as Honoré Daumier (1808-79) and Paul Gavarni (1804-66) seized upon the theatre box as a rich theme for social satire. By the 1870s leering men with over-sized opera glasses, middle-aged women struggling to maintain their appeal, fathers parading their elegant daughters, and gauche visitors from the provinces had emerged as stock types in weekly magazines such as *Le Petit Journal pour Rire* (fig. 9). The interest in the theatre, and particularly the loge as a space for social display, was also harnessed by the booming fashion industry which catered to the aspirational and newly wealthy middle class. Lavishly produced journals such as *La Mode Illustrée* included fine hand-coloured engravings showing the latest fashions modelled by elegant ladies in theatre boxes (fig. 8). A rich selection of this little-known graphic material from contemporary Parisian journals will be on display in the exhibition.

As the first artist to make the theatre box a subject for modern painting, Renoir drew on this popular visual culture, which would also have shaped the context in which his paintings were viewed. At the time of the first Impressionist exhibition Renoir had been particularly concerned with the loge and, in addition to the Courtauld picture, produced two smaller canvases, both of which will be displayed in the exhibition (fig. 2). Renoir returned to the theme in two later canvases. *At the Theatre*, 1876-7, (National Gallery, London) takes an oblique view of a theatre box, setting a young woman and her companion off against the blurred mass of the audience (fig. 3). *At the Concert*, 1880, (The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown) is one of Renoir's most monumental treatments of the subject, (fig. 4). This work started as a portrait of the family of Monsieur Turquet, the under-secretary of state for the fine arts, posed in their opulent theatre box. Renoir subsequently altered the composition, painting out his male patron who was originally shown in the background, and transforming the image into a fashionable but anonymous genre scene.

Renoir at the Theatre will be the first exhibition to focus on this group of works. It will also display a number of important loge paintings by Renoir's Impressionist contemporaries to explore alternative ways in which this subject was approached. Two major paintings by Mary Cassatt present contrasting views of women in their theatre boxes. *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, 1879, (Philadelphia Museum of Art) shows a beautifully dressed woman in the sparkling interior of a theatre box as the passive recipient of admiring gazes (fig. 6). *In the Loge*, 1878, is a very different representation where a soberly attired woman assertively surveys the theatre through her opera glasses as an active participant in the play of gazes that surrounds her (fig. 5). In Degas's treatments of the subject the artist explores different 'snapshot' viewpoints of the loge, as if capturing a fleeting glance. This is epitomised by his ambitious pastel *La Loge*, 1880 (private collection), in which the viewer is placed in the theatre stalls looking up at the head of a lone woman who emerges from the gilded surround of a loge, her pale face caught momentarily in a pool of light (fig. 7).

Renoir's *La Loge* received enthusiastic reviews when it was first exhibited in Paris in 1874 and later that year it travelled to London for an exhibition organised by his dealer Durand-Ruel, making it one of the first major Impressionist paintings to be shown in this country. However, the painting did not sell at either exhibition and was bought inexpensively the following year by the minor dealer 'Père' Martin for 425 francs, providing Renoir with much needed funds to pay the rent. When Samuel Courtauld purchased it in 1925 the status of the painting had risen considerably along with the price which was now £22,600 and one of Courtauld's most expensive acquisitions. Today *La Loge* is celebrated as one of the most important paintings of the Impressionist movement. This exhibition will cast new light upon Renoir's masterpiece and the spectacle of the Parisian theatre which it captures.

FACT SHEET

- Exhibition title:** *Renoir at the Theatre: Looking at 'La Loge'*
- Dates:** 21 February to 25 May 2008
- Sponsors:** Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert Lloyd, Nassau, Bahamas
Toray Industries, Inc.
- Summary:** Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) was one of the leading artists of the Impressionist movement. Renoir is famed for his sophisticated and fluent depictions of Parisian society and later for his sensuous nudes. Exhibited at the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874, *La Loge* helped establish his reputation as a pioneer of modern French painting. It is considered to be one of the defining paintings of Impressionism.
- This is the first exhibition devoted to *La Loge* and forms part of The Courtauld's successful series of exhibitions focused around paintings from the permanent collection. It includes major paintings by Renoir from the 1870s and important related works by Mary Cassatt, Edgar Degas and other contemporaries. It will also display a rich selection of previously unexhibited 19th century graphic material from contemporary publications, including caricatures from the popular press and luxury fashion plates.
- The exhibition is a highlight of the celebrations to mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1932.
- Related Display:** The exhibition will be complemented by a special display of rarely seen Impressionist and Post-Impressionist drawings from The Courtauld Gallery's celebrated collection of works on paper. The selection includes works by Renoir, Manet, Morisot, Gauguin and Pissarro, several of which have not been exhibited at the Courtauld before.
- Location:** The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2526, fax. +44 (0)20 7848 2589, www.courtauld.ac.uk
- Opening hours:** Daily 10 am to 6 pm, last admission 5.30 pm
- Admission:** Included in admission to permanent collection:
Adult: £5.00, concessions: £4.00; free admission: Mondays 10 am to 2 pm
Free at all times for under 18s, full-time UK students and unwaged
- Catalogue:** A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition including essays by Professor John House, leading authority on the work of Renoir, and Professor Aileen Ribeiro, an international expert on the history of dress, both of The Courtauld Institute of Art. 260 x 215 mm, approx. 128 pages, 80 colour illustrations. Published by Paul Holberton in association with The Courtauld Institute of Art, ISBN 9781903470732 (softback), price £20.00.

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