

FROM EXQUISITE TO TRANSGRESSIVE MODERNS? THE GONCOURT'S "DECADENT" EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ART REVIVAL

Juliet Simpson

As consummate collectors of French eighteenth-century art, the Goncourts' contribution to its nineteenth-century history is well-known. This article explores a less well-documented aspect of their *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle* (1858-1875): that is, its articulation of an art of latent decadence prior to the term's *fin-de-siècle* association with explicitly transgressive cultures of modernity. Indeed, the Goncourts were amongst the first writers of their age to use the art of a period linked with ideas of political and cultural decay to foreground and redefine latently "decadent" tendencies in mid-nineteenth-century French art and culture. In so doing, they were to produce a paradigm of "decadence" as a dynamics of history, art and art-writing operating at the boundaries between ideas of cultural decline and its recuperation in terms of a new artistry of heightened material, sensory and aesthetic expression. My article's principal concern is this relationship. It is to consider how, and in what sense aspects of the Goncourts' *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle* contribute to an expanded sense of "decadence" for mid-nineteenth-century cultures of art, creating from this, a "decadent" type of revival that situates the Goncourts' art writings as significant, if overlooked sources for *fin-de-siècle* literary and artistic interest in "transgressively" modern literary and artistic innovations.

1 *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle*: "decadence", revival and "modernité"

L'Art du dix-huitième siècle, published as a series of twelve individual studies as *fascicules* between 1859 and 1875¹ appeared in its first collected edition in 1873-4. This was the "de-luxe" two-volume Rapilly edition,² now rare, prefaced by Edmond, heavily ornamented with illustrations, vignettes and lavish bindings. In one sense, as this luxury object attests, it represented a landmark of "recovery". It was a grandiose statement to over twenty-years of art-collecting designed to impress by its erudition: to restore "dans le dix-neuvième siècle, le dix-huitième oublié", as Roger Marx put it in 1893 (Roger Marx, 1893, xiv).³ Yet, in another sense it was to be viewed in the Goncourts' own terms as "une résurrection" (Goncourts, 1926C, 159). This was a more intimate type of history than a survey, disdaining the compendious in favour of Edmond's declared fascination with "le cela presque inexprimable qui est dans un objet d'art" (Goncourts, 1873, ii). The 1873-4 Preface's stress on what is materially "inexpressible" in art works is provocative, perhaps deliberately so. It looks both to

¹ Published by Dentu in twelve individual, ornamented fascicules in 200 issues per fascicule. For full details of publication, see *Bibliothèque de Goncourts – Livres modernes* (1897), 131-32.

² *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle* (2nd complete edn), Rapilly, Librairie et Marchand d'Estampes (5 Quai Malaquais); Vol. 1 (Watteau, Chardin, Boucher, La Tour, Greuze, Les Saint-Aubin, 1873); Vol. 2 (Gravelot, Cochin, Eisen, Moreau, Debucourt, Fragonard, Prud'hon).

³ Reinforced by P. de Chennevières's acclaim for their renovation of "de notre histoire nationale [...] le XVIII^e siècle, c'était eux", "Préface", *Collection des Goncourts: dessins, aquarelles et pastels du XVIII^e siècle* (1897), xxi; xxii.

Second-Empire interests and towards the *fin-de-siècle*, suggesting a different optic on the studies that comprise *L'Art du dix-huitième* than late Romantic or antiquarian nostalgia for an “exquisite” eighteenth-century of Louis XVI.⁴ In fact the “materials” and processes of art and their reworking into extraordinary sensory and aesthetic experiences emerge as determining themes in the Goncourts’ art criticism from its beginnings. Their first histories of eighteenth-century society are permeated by their interest in the document, the material “rélique” and “cette reconstruction du microcosme humain” (Goncourts, 1926B, 163), with forgotten, decayed objects that bear deposits of “l’âme humaine” (Goncourts, 1926B, 165);⁵ with painting, as substance, or as “chemistry” as “un art matérialiste” to be worked on (Goncourts, 1926A, 206) to be reanimated, in short, “resurrected”.

But this interest in the potential of decayed, marginal materials to shape new routes to a neglected “histoire intime” (Goncourts, 1926B, 154), experienced vicariously, takes a different turn during the early 1860s. It finds expression in the Goncourts’ more developed concern with “le vrai”, with document, scientific observation and “milieu”: interests which address, yet to some degree subvert a legislated, Second-Empire emphasis on the “real”, on facts⁶ to situate their “documents” as triggers for tastes and experiences, “le cela presque inexprimable”, at the frontiers of those deemed aesthetically and culturally normative. In this, a growing and broader contemporary social concern with the problem of “decadence” emerges as central. In 1870, Pierre Larousse’s long entry on the subject in his *Grand Dictionnaire*, was to diagnose periods of decadence associated with despotic epochs, cultures and saliently, with their ruination, to underscore, the achievements – and potential – of the socially *modern* progressive state.⁷ But this idea was already anticipated in Taine’s writings of the early-to-mid 1860s, in his preoccupation with social and cultural evolution as a corrective to the aberrations of “decadent” societies

⁴ Widespread during the 1840s, 1850s and early 1860s attested in particular in literature by G. Nerval’s, *Petits châteaux de bohème* (1855); P. Verlaine’s *Fêtes galantes* (1859); in art, by C. Blanc’s *Maîtres de la fête galante* (1854); A. Houssaye’s *Histoire de l’art français au dix-huitième siècle* (1860); characterized by a dominant yearning for an exquisite aristocratic eighteenth century linked with the Regency and subsequent period to the 1760s stimulated by “le goût de Watteau et de Boucher”: see, for example, S.O. Simches, *Le Romantisme et le goût esthétique du XVIII^e siècle* (1964), 16-20; 24-47.

⁵ Extended to their eighteenth-century art studies in their compilation of autographs, biographical fragments, letters and miscellany, as evidenced, for example, in research to construct “histories intimes” of individual artists (see, for example, letter from A. Constantin to Jules de Goncourt, d. April 1861 detailing Prudhon’s early life) in E. & J. de Goncourt, *Correspondance générale (1843-62)*, 1 (2004), 525-27.

⁶ In Acts, notably the Amendement Riancé (1851) which legislated against the expression of emotion and passion in the serialized “roman feuilleton”: how far this legislation affected other areas of culture during the Second Empire is yet to be explored, but complaints such as Gautier’s – “ils [the censors] ne veulent plus du sexe dans le roman” (E. & J. de Goncourt, *Journal*, 1 March 1862) indicate by the early 1860s, oppressive censorship of “morals” and direction towards facts with risible consequences – “je suis réduire à décrire consciencieusement un mur [...] je ne peux pas décrire ce qui peut être dessiné dessus, un phallus, par exemple”: Gautier (Goncourts, 1956, 1, 778).

⁷ Notably in his key point that societies built on despotism, enslavement and inequality (political and cultural) are antithetical to progressive action – as demonstrated in ancient and more recent models of society where such factors as “la théocratie, l’esclavage, l’excès des inégalités sociales, l’esprit de conquête”, indicate a shift from the liberal to despotic or *decadent* state: P. Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire*, t. 6 (1870, Larousse, 1982), 206-7.

And it is this increasing identification of decadence with a broader discourse of social, cultural and artistic regression, with the *anti-modern*, that forms a significant context, for resituating the Goncourts' *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle* as revivals that suggest their "anti-modern" and "decadent" interests as stimuli for alternative and even transgressively modern expressions. Their six longest, arguably most significant eighteenth-century art studies – Watteau (1860), Prud'hon (1861), Boucher (1862), Greuze (1863), Chardin (1864) and Fragonard (1865) – were published during the period that saw the formation of the Magny dinners, with Taine, Gautier, and Renan in March 1863⁸ (first inaugurated, December 1862) as well as hectic, first-hand research for their first "realist" fictions, *Soeur Philomène* (1861) and *Germinie Larcerieux* (1864). The latter, especially, put into practice their view, established with the Goncourts' eighteenth-century histories, that "le vrai, c'est le fond de tout art"⁹ and galvanized their heightened sensory responsiveness to states of sickness, decay and bodily corruption, as enhanced stimulants to their artistic recreation.

Getting under the skin of their materials, expanding ideas of "refinement" to excite experiences both exquisite and grim in "cette autopsie perpétuelle"¹⁰ emerge as central themes in the studies comprising *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle*, shaping from their interests, a very contemporary aestheticism that runs counter to the perceived historical "nostalgia" of the studies' period and subjects.¹¹ If this process is suggested in the 1860 Watteau study, the play on Tainean themes and motifs, on exploiting the artistic potential of both the historically and biologically decadent form, becomes more marked in the subsequent studies on Boucher, Greuze and Fragonard. But even in "Watteau", there are signs of things to come. From the start, there is a focus on Watteau's language of "mélancolie" as suggestive of the twilight of an era – of an exquisitely "corrupt" aesthetic which the Goncourts' intimate as becoming emblematic of *their* modern artistry. Yet these themes acquire a new resonance in an almost forensic focus on Watteau's language of graceful materiality: "cette chose subtile qui semble le sourire de la ligne, l'âme de la forme, la de la matière" (Goncourts, 1881, 3-4). His art is thereby distanced from its association with nostalgic, Romantic view of it and repositioned as object of interest for both the contemporary scientist and collector-aesthete. Much emphasis is devoted to Watteau's treatment of women, not only as erotic objects, but in a new twist, as fragments, as materials, composing "décors" of hyper-aesthetic visual and textural suggestiveness in their "serpentements et les ondulations, les souplesses du corps féminine"(Goncourts, 1881, 4), and their oxymoronic "voluptés sans desires"

⁸ See E. & J. de Goncourt, *Journal* (14 March 1863): "aujourd'hui dîne Taine" (Goncourts 1956, 1, 945-46).

⁹ *Journal*, 10 December 1860: (Goncourts, 1956, 1, 642).

¹⁰ "Cette espèce de travail [...] cette autopsie perpétuelle [...] à découvrir les fibres les plus délicats, à les faire jouer de la façon fine", *Journal*, 19 August 1862: (Goncourts 1956, 1, 840).

¹¹ Notably by A. Brookner, *The Genius of the Future* (1971, 134-5) and D. Silverman's view of the Goncourts' eighteenth-century collecting tastes as expressive of their longing for a rococo "art de vivre" (*Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 1989, 17-39). Cf. S. Champeau's view of this nostalgia as linked with an emerging new aesthetic of the modern artistic condition in which nostalgia *a fortiori* defines "les plus délicats et les plus malheureux des êtres" (*La notion d'artiste chez les Goncourt*, 2000), 392-93.

(Goncourts, 1881, 10). Striking in this portrayal is the Goncourts' presentation of Watteau's art as expressive of a sensuality and materiality, neither passionate nor "moral". Although, "spiritual", Watteau's is a spirituality, that unlike Baudelaire's,¹² is seen almost exclusively as a development of matter and of sensory or nervous irritation by it.¹³ But the theme takes an explicitly Tainean direction in the studies on Boucher and Greuze, where it becomes openly linked with a discourse of modern cultural and aesthetic decadence.

In both studies, the Goncourts make much play on Taine's ideas of "milieu" and "la faculté maîtresse", or the defining trait of a culture as a whole, to turn indicators of decadence to new artistic purposes, hinting, too, at their transgressive reinventions in later Goncourtian fiction and art writings. Taine was grappling with these ideas in the late 1850s and 1860s, related to his philosophy and science of social group laws in determining how civilizations develop. Broached first in his 1856 essay on *Tite Live* (1860), expanded in his 1861 *La Fontaine* study and in contemporary articles for *Le Débat*, he sees "decadence" as the reverse of social progress, as the breakdown of civilization when its social unity becomes corrupted by excess, criminality and disease.¹⁴ Yet his founding example – the Fall of Ancient Rome read through Livy's *Annales* – glosses an exemplary history of decline to code a more contemporary Napoleonic historical and cultural parallel. This is Livy's account of Roman military "indiscipline" during Manlius's Asian conquest, c.346BC and fatal susceptibility to invasive "luxe étranger" especially to luxury objects,¹⁵ producing, in Taine view, "une nation voluptueuse et raffinée" (Taine, 1860, 145) presaging its downfall and decay.

Although Taine does not link these examples of historical decadence with visual art until 1866 in his first Sorbonne lectures and *Voyage en Italie*, these too are guided by key ideas extrapolated from his Roman model. But they are developed through principles deriving from Darwinian models of natural selection and adaptation.¹⁶ Thus praise for Michelangelo's sculpture, for example, is tempered by its plastic expression of "les sociétés gâtés" (Taine, 1924, 1, 223); similarly, the spectacular form of Bernini's and of late Baroque art is linked to a corruption of Christian rite into "culte" and ornament (1924, 1, 231).¹⁷ Each is seen symptomatic of a broader failure of society to regulate its own limits to excessive refinement, for, as Taine's Introductory comments insist, in art as in society, "la puissance individuelle" stalls evolution, but "la race supérieure est celle qui est apte à la société et au développement" (1924, 1, 17). For Taine, decadence is therefore salient in modern society principally as a negative, regressive phenomenon. "Excess" and over-

¹² As encapsulated, for Baudelaire, by Constantin Guys's art (*Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, 1863) expressive, as he sees it, of a "spiritualité" that evokes modernity's visionary, "supernatural" aspects.

¹³ On Cousin and the institutionalizing of the spiritual, see J. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (2005), 470-76.

¹⁴ Also developed in his *Essais de critique et d'histoire* (1858), notably in the essay on "Racine" (1858, Taine 1905, 118-19); and on *La Fontaine* (1860).

¹⁵ For example, "des tapis précieux"; "des voiles"; "autres tissus déliés"; "ces tables a un seul pied" (Taine, 1860, 165).

¹⁶ Cf. Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, translated into French, 1862.

¹⁷ "Ils [les édifices ecclésiastiques] glorifiant, non le christianisme, mais l'Eglise": (Taine, 1924, 1, 231).

refinement violate natural and social laws that hold more despotic forces in check. It was perhaps with some cause that the Magny diners joked about the “puritan” Taine, his social vision founded on harnessing art and “la garde nationale”.¹⁸

Even so, the emphasis Taine places on the despotism not just of rulers but of material luxuries and art forms as triggers of broader social and cultural breakdown is significant here. As anticipated in the Goncourts’ “Watteau” study, it is this very area of tension and ambiguity in Taine’s thinking *vis-à-vis* the aesthetic that the Goncourts develop, exploit and rewrite, in their later eighteenth-century art studies. First-hand contacts, conversations and exchange of books,¹⁹ indicate that these ideas were shared and debated prior to 1866 between the Goncourts, Taine and fellow Magny diners (Gautier, Renan and Sainte-Beuve). In an 1864 Journal entry, for example, Jules refers to a vigorous exchange with Taine on the matter of “decadence”, neurosis and health.²⁰ March 1866 sees a lengthy dispute recorded on the issue of Taine’s “faculté maitresse”, countered by arguments by the Goncourts and Gautier about the “exceptionality” of artists.²¹ The Boucher and the Greuze studies are notable for their engagement with such debates. Increasingly, the Goncourts exploit their “exquisite” subjects as opportunities for exploring anew an historical decadence close at hand, invoking its inverted expressions of Taine’s “faculté maitresse”, to reveal the artistry of its decayed art cultures in a transformed light, as aesthetically and culturally compelling sources for more modern forms of art.

Boucher, for example, is seen as a model of Watteau’s sensualism pushed to an extreme, even perverse expression. In this way, an earlier “Boucher” of Diderot is selectively represented by the Goncourts in terms of his “decadence délicateuse” (Goncourts, 1881, 190): the feature that had attracted moral censure by Diderot and of an earlier age. Above all, the Goncourts’ interest is in Boucher’s embodiment of a sensuality combined with extreme artifice that suggests him as an avatar for their age. His art of voluptuous delicacy and “raffinement”; his cultivation of “le joli” coupled with “l’indécence” (Goncourts, 1881, 210) exemplifies what is characteristic of his period’s culture, of “la gentillesse d’une decadence délicateuse” (Goncourts, 1881, 190). Yet Boucher’s art also recreates it by exaggerating what is merely implicit in the norm as parallels between Boucher’s art and Ovid’s as “deux peintres de la *decadence*” attest (Goncourts’ emphasis: 1881, 209). The comparison signals an extension in the Goncourts’ critical perspectives and practices from the frisson of evoking decadent subjects in states of suggested perverse eroticism and depravity, to collecting and reanimating them in new forms of collection and artifice. Indeed, these ideas are developed through focus on Boucher’s “volupté” as a defining feature of his art (“c’est tout l’idéal de Boucher”: Goncourts, 1881, 210) and in the

¹⁸ *Journal*, 18 January 1864: (Goncourts, 1956, 1, 1048).

¹⁹ Taine sent the Goncourts autographed copies of the first edition of his *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (Hachette, 4 vols, 1863-64) signed “à MM de Goncourt”; they also possessed his *Voyage aux eaux des Pyrénées* (1855), probably of interest for its sixty-five vignettes by Doré (*Bibliothèque des Goncourts – Livres modernes*, 1897), 108.

²⁰ Referring to Taine’s view of neurosis as symptomatic of decadent societies: *Journal*, 18 January 1864: (Goncourts, 1956, 1, 1047).

²¹ “Taine soutient que tous les hommes de talent sont des produits de leur milieu. Gautier et nous, soutenons [...] qu’ils sont des exceptions”, *Journal*, 15 January 1866: (Goncourts, 1956, 2, 3).

Goncourts' way of writing this up that moves Boucher's decadence from the interest of the *curieux* to modelling the sensorily advanced modern artist and collector.

Boucher's decadence thus comes to imply a state of perverse aesthetic perception on the part of both artist and audience that is latently *fin-de-siècle* in its implications. This is underscored by the greater emphasis than in the Watteau study devoted to detailed evocations of individual paintings. At several key points, as in evocations of the Versailles *Hercules et Omphale* and *Le Coucher du Soleil*, the theme of Boucher's decadence is developed aesthetically, sensually and textually in ways that emphasize interest as much in the responses generated by the subject as in the subject itself. In the Goncourts' reanimation of their pictorial source, Omphale's body, for example, has morphed into "un étalage de chair fleurie, de lignes ondulantes, de formes qu'on dirait modelées par une caresse" (Goncourts, 1881, 210). Her flesh is envisaged as erotically pliant, almost melting, "aux coquetteries des molles attitudes", as obsessively provocative of tactile sensations (Goncourts, 1881, 209, 210). Around her play improbably pneumatic "Amours" with their "petites mains engorgées, leurs jointures bouffles [...] leurs derrières de Cupidon [...] leurs formes ébauchées et renflées, qui parfois, sous le crayon de Boucher, prennent une ampleur presque superbe" (Goncourts, 1881, 211). Such languages, moreover, build to a climax in the discussion, especially of Boucher's *Coucher de Soleil*, in the final section of the study, counter-pointing an equally intense interest in their transformative and performative possibilities as "décors". The passage on Boucher's *Coucher du Soleil*, for example, again pointedly highlights the tactile suggestiveness of the group of nymphs attending Thetis in their "corps bléutés", their "touche fluide", "ligne molle" and "extrémités de ses corps" (Goncourts' emphasis: 1881, 228). Such "performative" elements, indeed, are seen as expressive of Boucher's degradation. For the Goncourts, they become markers of his exceptional "signature": a signature fusing Boucher's "vulgarité élégante" (Goncourts, 1881, 239) with a tactile pliancy that suggests both a state of "decadence" as decay and its recuperation by what Vouilloux terms, a process of artistic and *textual* "épanouissement" (Vouilloux, 1997, 164) or through its exaggerated appeal to an aesthetic of surface effects and gratification.

Yet the "transgressive" dimension of this decadence is to be found not in Boucher's treatment of his subjects, nor even in Boucher's fleshy eroticism and its intensely detailed evocations. It is, rather, in the ways in which Boucher's decadence becomes emblematic of the Goncourts' dissection and re-imagining of an art and a whole period as a series of exquisite body parts, rather than as a unity of vision. As a dismembered epoch, the metonymic remains, like the fetishized bodily corruption, of Soeur Philomène's death²² (or the "deux blanches petals" of the dead children's faces, observed by the Goncourts in the mortuary of *La Salpêtrière*) are recuperated and function as a form of collection; they compose unsettling spectacles (expressions of "beau bizarre") that recreate further forms of artifice.

²² "J'ai vu [...] un dos tale, déforme par le lit, ou la chair n'a plus de forme, un peu comme un dos d'enfant serré par les langes", *Journal*, 19 December 1860: (Goncourts, 1956, 1, 646); the previous entry on their visits to La Charité, evokes their impressions of suffering women as "presque voluptueux de mystérieusement irritant" (Goncourts, 1956, 1, 645).

If the other signal nineteenth-century instance of this idea – Géricault’s *Severed Limbs* (1818-9) – confronts the viewer with an albeit shockingly extreme spectacle of Romantic beauty, what distances the Goncourts’ position from a Romantic filiation, is that their focus on parts offers no metaphysically comforting spectre of their separation from a lost or imagined whole. Indeed, this idea is reinforced by the excessive and repetitive quality of their textual evocations making textual artistry, the Goncourts’ “écriture artiste”,²³ as important as Boucher’s paintings, drawings and their technical refinement (his “ampleur superbe” – 211), in building the expression of his “décadence délicate”. But while lexical repetition increasingly codes the idea of descriptive coherence taken to the point of its breakdown and fragmentation, it also intensifies effects of desire and power, for there is a sense in which writing here is made to possess art. The association of this practice of “écriture artiste” mainly with visual Impressionism²⁴ is to overlook its significant emergence as a textual counterpart to the Goncourts’ fascination with the sensually decadent qualities they perceive in eighteenth-century art and in appropriating these qualities in extending critical artifices, in which a loading of lexis actually frustrates the purported “realism” of its function. This is a decadence which cannot be adequately contained or described by language although a corresponding textual ornamentalism – what Vouilloux has called the Goncourts’ “style mosaïque, style bibelot” – goes some way towards evoking its artifices (Vouilloux, 1997, 162).²⁵ But language might mirror or develop Boucher’s “decadence” in – as Fumaroli suggests – a counter-pointing textual “rocaille”²⁶: the visual metaphor picking up on the density of “ornamental” effects, that for the Goncourts, Boucher’s art codes. Yet in its superfluity, even the “rocaille” seem too static a concept for the Goncourts’ re-imagining of Boucher’s decadence in terms of linguistic tropes, marked by their fluidity, their “touches des phrases” comparable, as Edmond later would suggest, to “des effleurements et des caresses,”²⁷ that turn stasis – the past, fragments of history – to movement, the present, to a perverse new life, emblematic in Boucher’s “touche fluide”, the “extrémités de ses corps”, that open frontiers of sensations, “non conventionnelle”, of materials, of desire.

The “Greuze” study develops this transgressive figure of the new collection made up from an accretion of parts and sensations of them, extended metonymically, in a similar play of decadent literary materials and languages. Here the conceit is also to develop a Tainean idea of milieu only to expose it as another form of artifice. Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* supplies the optic which reveals the implicit decadence in Greuze’s apparently virtuous subject-matter, turning it into something

²³ Defined in the “Préface” to *Les Frères Zemganno* (1879) as their recreation of a “[réalité] de l’élégance” (Goncourts, 1926D, 32).

²⁴ See, for example, D. Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: the Entropic Vision* (1990), 94.

²⁵ Referring to Huysmans’s comparison of the Goncourts’ “langue orfèvrée” with Gustave Moreau’s style “mosaïque” (in *Le Salon officiel en 1880*: Vouilloux, 1997, 162).

²⁶ In the context of the Goncourts’ debts to Balzac in creating, in their eighteenth-century histories, “une modernité rocaille”: M. Fumaroli, “Le siècle des Goncourt ou le XVIIIe siècle réhabilité” (Cabanès, *et. al*, 2005, 24).

²⁷ “Je voudrais trouver les touches des phrases semblables à des touches de peintre dans une esquisse: des effleurements et des caresses pour ainsi dire les glacis de la chose écrite”, *Journal*, 22 March 1882: (Goncourt, 1956, 2, 932).

vicarious as a visual “confessional”: another reversal of artifice as “une sorte de volupté virginale”. Exposing “milieu” as yet another body of materials, as dismembered “corps” and chemistry to work on (“une autopsie perpetuelle”), in turn raises broader questions about whether “milieu” is something definable or in process, is natural or artificial, stable or in flux, a concept that determines art or is artificially engendered by it. Section seven of the study goes on to develop these ideas in relating Greuze’s artistic “depravity” to his broader cultural decadence. Once again, the Goncourts appropriate from an earlier historical and critical source, taking aesthetic and literary cues from Diderot’s view of Greuze’s innocent tenderness to undermine it, using Diderot’s *Salons* (1763-4) as a set of critical tropes within their expanded recreation of Greuze’s art. More than this: Diderot is positioned as only part of an enlarged milieu for understanding Greuze – a milieu, that through its very “critical”, textual invention by a palimpsest of “documents humains” (Goncourts, 1926, 53) is exposed as unreliable and fragmentary. By contrast, the Goncourts evoke Greuze’s artistic milieu as characterized as much by its tendency for degradation as by its virtuous aspects: ideas that further rework Taine’s principle to expose what it suppresses. Greuze’s paintings, therefore, as shown in *The Village Accordionist*, reveal themselves in a new light as mirrors of an “innocence” which is not as it seems virtuous or even natural, but a new and more refined expression a sensuality, expressing “une pointe de libertinage [...] concourt à cette irritation sensuelle” (Goncourts, 1882, 35).

Again, the Goncourts are at pains to show that only deeper dissection of their materials allow us access to this view. To be merely scientific is not enough: it takes an artist’s eye to develop the potential of Greuze’s “irritation sensuelle” (Goncourts, 1882, 38). As in the portrayal of Boucher, this sensory irritation is the key to Greuze’s “decadence” and the conduit for its prolongation. In this, Greuze’s female portraits, like Boucher’s nudes, become re-envisioned not as historical subjects, but as fetishized parts for projecting and stimulating desire, their apparently chaste appearances exposing latent vices by their “gorges s’avancent, provoquantes et serrées”, their costumes which “ajoute encore à cette voluptueuse mollesse des tissus ondoyants” (Goncourts, 1882, 38). Even their very clothing, its materials and textures emblemize perversity in their “toilettes déliées, sans résistances” and “[la] coquetterie friponne, des plis irritants” (Goncourts, 1882, 39) imaging their “enfance perverse”.

Yet what is even more signal here is that the Goncourts again give language a special role in recreating Greuze’s art as a medium for its reconstitution as a model for new sensory and textual perceptions. So “corrupt innocence” is developed not only thematically but materially, through an accretion of textual – documentary and fictional sources – offered as *milieux* (in the accretion of historical and fictional source materials, derived for example, from Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses*) as well as by parallel rhetorical tropes which textually extend effects of Greuze’s depravity. Even figures of desire become material to play with. The idea is ever more insistently coded in the Goncourts’ writing-up of Greuze’s female subjects, again in repetitive lexical markers that stress in their sensory and textual ductility, materials to be reshaped and *consumed*, with their “tons mouillées”, their “chair blanche, douilleté et chaude”, their white muslin gowns that induce “une délicate excitation de

débauche”(Goncourt, 1882, 39). Fragonard’s art is approached through similar tropes, likewise re-presented in terms of a cultural latency, “de génie presque italien, d’esprit français” (Goncourts, 1882A, 242) that determines the viewpoint through which his aesthetic “impurity” or “débauche” is re-appropriated by the Goncourts’ view as evidence of exceptionality within his milieu. Once again, the target goes beyond redressing previous errors in aesthetic judgement. It is to rescue what is exquisite in the apparently corrupt, to objectify, mould and effectively reanimate it to suggest new sources and models for art. In Fragonard’s case the message could not be more explicit. Ruins, monuments metamorphose as “décors” (Goncourts, 1882A, 252); his allegories, as “un coup de théâtre [...] éclairs de la féerie” (1882A, 261) in “peinture, mourante, expirante, et comme pâmée, toute pleine de la caresse cherchée par les décadences et les plus exquises corruptions de l’art!” (1882A, 279).

2 Eighteenth-century art, “décor” and *fin-de-siècle* “transgressive” reinventions

Indeed, by this explicit focus on Fragonard’s “peinture mourante” as emblematic of a sensational world and its experience developed to a point of perversity, the study highlights key ways in which the collection’s “decadent” themes are elaborated, especially in the later studies, as presciently modern. These are: in their recuperation of a set of “revivals” for a perversely imagined collection; as inspirational of new, hyper-aestheticized art forms and languages, and of a proto-decadent history and an “écriture artiste” evolved from it. While the collection, therefore, is shaped by its Second-Empire cultural and ideological context and to extending discourses of science and realism in the Goncourts’ and their contemporaries’ writings (including on art), the first collected 1874 edition of *L’Art du dix-huitième siècle*, positions its interests and approaches at the frontier of something new. It anticipates the reappearance of the Goncourts’ eighteenth-century art interests as more explicitly transgressive, shaping the “fin-de-siècle” aesthete’s collection as evoked in Edmond’s *La Maison d’un artiste* (1881), emblematically recurring, too, in La Faustin’s artifices of identity and appearances in *La Faustin* (1882) or in the hybridized composites of eighteenth-century documents that compose the exquisitely artificial world of *Chérie* (1884). Indeed, common to all these texts is their reconfiguring of earlier, object-based art revivals and their “histories”. They become hybrid material and “fictional” elements in the creation of interior and internalizing aesthetic “décors” that code new subjective worlds and expanding fictions of them. Of these, the most salient here is *La Maison d’un artiste*. It provides the most extended example of the evolved decadent “aesthetic” environment and of a mirroring “texte hybride” (Cabanès, 2002, 28) that underscores *La Faustin* and *Chérie*, to recreate for its contemporaries, a material and fictional template of the proto-Symbolist “maison d’art”.²⁸

Key to this idea is Edmond de Goncourt’s signal use of the brothers’ eighteenth-century French art collections (and writings on them) to shape the interior aesthetic world of *La Maison d’un artiste* through their repositioning in an extended, transgressive identity-play of its (eponymous) aesthete-creator. This takes three forms of salience here. First, is the use of eighteenth-century objects and tastes to

²⁸ See J. Simpson, “Edmond de Goncourt’s décors – Towards the Symbolist *maison d’art*”, *Romance Studies*, 29: 1 (January 2011), 1-18.

model what Vouilloux has called “un style de vie” (Vouilloux, 1997, 152); but more than this, in a transgressive sense, to sublimate personality as a trope of “décor”.²⁹ Second, the creation of a unified fiction of a rococo “art de vivre” (Silverman, 1989, 17) is constantly undermined by the text’s evocation of a material creation, characterized by its decorative hybridity and state of continuous physical and virtual mutation.³⁰ Eighteenth-century art objects thus combine with near and Far-Eastern art and decorative art collections to shape rooms, spaces and their “décors” or staged art environments³¹ (as with the rêveries inspired by the *Grand Salon*’s eighteenth-century displays or the erotic *fête-galantes* of the principal Bedroom’s Aubusson swagged bed, the ceramic displays of the *Cabinet de toilette*, the garden’s aristocratic eighteenth-century architectural ones), in a constant staging of collecting, writing and life. Third, these artifices are heightened not only by physical and virtual “décors” that are emblematic of various “artistic” personae of their creator, but in the use of objects as deposits for displaced sexual desire and identity.

This last theme, recurrent throughout *La Maison d’un artiste*, is developed textually by it, from the Preface’s suggestive linking of the pleasures of the solitary, “interior” life with a state of “assouissement artistique” (Goncourt, 2003, 1, 3), to the more explicitly erotic stimulation inspired by the *Grand Salon*’s Clodion statuette, “palpitante dans souple élasticité du chair” (2003, 1, 182) the marble “baigneuse”, the *Cheminée*’s focal point in the *Salle-à-manger*, “délicieusement tortillée de la grace abattue fluette” and “penetrated” by light “presque comme de la chair” (Goncourt, 2003, 1, 19), to the sensory, lingeringly tactile evocations of the Sèvres-ware in the *Cabinet de toilette* with its multiple registers of visual and surface allure, “cette porcelaine tendre, au charme indicible, à la pâte onctueuse, mélangée de tout” (Goncourt, 2003, 2, 194). What is significant here is the appropriation of earlier art-critical interests in the context of a newer bourgeois vogue for tasteful house “decoration” (associated particularly with de-luxe eighteenth-century decorative art revivals³²) in settings that transgress “normative” boundaries of taste to model unsettling sexual-object-subject repetitions in which art and decorative art objects are also staged as “personae” in their own suggestively perverse *tableaux*.

And the suggestiveness of these aesthetic tableaux is further developed in the fictions they generate. Indeed, for this article’s purposes, *La Maison d’un artiste*’s

²⁹ Cf. D. Pety’s exploration mainly in terms of it as an extension of the Goncourts’ collecting aesthetic (*Les Goncourts et la collection*, 2003), especially, 105-33.

³⁰ On its textual hybridity as “decadent” see G. Sicotte, “La Maison-texte de Goncourt”, *Image & Narrative* (February 2006), n.p. Cf. Simpson (2011), on the interplay between its hybrid material and virtual “décors” (9-12).

³¹ A process charted by Edmond in the evolution of his house décors: for example, his completion of the *Cabinet de travail* in 1875, indicates a sense of what he means by “décor” in his evocation of its interwoven, aesthetic harmony of objects, settings and effects – “c’est charmante toutes ces choses brillants [...] cette harmonie somptueuse à vivre dans ce monde d’objets d’art si peu bourgeois”, *Journal*, 4 November 1875: (Goncourt, 1956, 2, 662).

³² Demonstrated notably by the eighteenth-century art and decorative art collections and interiors (from the period Louis XV to Louis XVI) for the Hôtel Jacquemart-André, inaugurated, 1876, extensively covered in *L’Illustration*; the publication of major eighteenth-century revivals, notably, Paul Lacroix’s opulent *XVIIIème siècle: Lettres, sciences et arts en France 1700-1789* (1878) and such “decorating” style manuals as Henry Havard’s *L’Art dans la maison: grammaire de l’ameublement* (1884), that promoted “tasteful” interior decoration styles for the bourgeois home modelled on that of an eighteenth-century Parisian *hôtel*.

most striking transgressive manipulation of the Goncourts' earlier eighteenth-century art-collecting and critical interests is their elaboration within extended textual "décors": "décors" that erode boundaries between object fictions and Goncourt's aesthetic identifies of "self" in a transgressive play of the hybrid self as constructed by its multiple visions and fictions. While this idea is not an exclusive creation of eighteenth-century "décors" alone, the eighteenth-century elements code stages in a process of evolving self artifice, that evolves, as *La Maison d'un artiste*'s textual architecture suggests, from memory and the predominantly eighteenth-century world of the ground-floor spaces, to the hybrid decorative environments of the first and second-floor rooms and the idea of the "living" collection. Thus, at key points in the narrative, eighteenth-century art acquisitions trigger memories of the Goncourts' earlier, joint writing and collecting life as in the Grand Salon's Clodion *terres cuites*, unlocking narratives of the Goncourts' first collecting efforts, of exquisite gains – the Beauvais chairs, Natoire ceiling tapestry, for example – won from the proceeds of *Germinie Lacerteux* (2003, 186-87). Yet these, too, are reanimated as fetishized objects within collecting "décors": ideas coded at their most suggestive in the descriptions that comprise spectacles of memory and acquisition in the inventories of eighteenth-century art catalogues in the *Petit Salon*'s collections and in the manifold eighteenth-century texts and document repertoires of the *Cabinet de travail*'s.

They are also implicated in further stagings through Goncourt's recreation of himself in his *Petit Salon* chapter, as a "decorator-creator", as "un inventeur d'intérieurs pour gens riches" (Goncourt, 2003, 1, 25) – an idea interwoven with its mirroring elaboration in the unfolding dynamic of the decorative, "texte hybride": the model, indeed, that informs both *La Faustin*'s and *Chérie*'s. The "interior" world of *La Maison d'un artiste* is not, therefore, as it might initially seem an aesthetic process that lays bare a concealed subjective identity, but is emblematic of a "dandified" condition. In short: it rejects or remodels the inwardness of the private *musée imaginaire* (including of memory) to engage more richly with the allure – and enigma – of surface, just as La Faustin stages her actress identity not in reference to an authentic self (an "essential" being), only in terms of recurring eighteenth-century decorative tropes of her exquisite artifice. Indeed, *La Faustin*'s extended engagement with these themes helps to account for its stilted narrative, structured in oddly truncated "scenes". At the story's core are La Faustin's "performances" – of art, beauty and self. Comparable to cameos of nervous beauty with "sa belle et nerveuse tête de tragédienne" (Goncourt, 1979, 213); in the svelte elegance of her "toilette", to a work of eighteenth-century art, "le délicat et juvenile modélage d'un corps de fillette" (1979, 346), such artifices become, further, a performed intimacy of self and love (320-21) that, in La Faustin's vicarious final desire to "act" the death rictus of her lover's face, lead to her ultimate unmasking in love, life and of the artifices of her actress identities.

These examples indeed attest to what has become, in the later Goncourtian works, a highly transgressive vision of an artificial "decadent" self as material for art, built on the trope of the collection – of art, histories, documents, texts, of sensations – in short, of remains, as its motor. In this, the collection of *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle*, emerges as pivotal. Through a complex renegotiation of ruptured, degraded art and cultural histories, the Goncourts develop from their art revivals both "monuments

intimes” and “cadavres exquis” in which the Goncourts’ writing about them, exposes potential to grow a new aesthetic, cultural, even social order from their decadent, excessive and perverse attributes. Indeed, as sublimations of these earlier interests in the “décor”-centred world of *La Maison d’un artiste* suggests, the eighteenth-century art and decorative elements point towards a new modernity, emerging with the hybrid environment of the aesthete-creator, as a space in which both “history” and “fictions”, as both originals and their substitutes, converge. It is the aesthete-creator that stands at the forefront of a new artistic and cultural modernity modelled on its abnormal relationships of art to life, of “décor” to history, of catalogue to story, of object worlds to subject identities, in sum: on the ductility of the Goncourtian “self” as matter for its continual and transgressive recreation.

Bibliography

- Bibliothèque de Goncourts – Livres modernes*. Paris: Vente Drouot Catalogue (5-10 April), 1897 (cat. no. 981).
- Anita Brookner, *The Genius of the Future: Essays in French Art Criticism: Diderot, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Zola, the Brothers Goncourt, Huysmans*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.
- David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: the Entropic Vision*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Stéphanie Champeau, *La notion d’artiste chez les Goncourt (1852-1870)*. Paris: H. Champion, 2000.
- Philippe de Chennevières, *Collection des Goncourts: dessins, aquarelles et pastels du XVIII siècle*. Paris: Vente Drouot Catalogue (15-17 February) 1897.
- Marc Fumaroli, “Le Siècle des Goncourt ou le XVIII siècle réhabilité”, *Les Goncourt dans leurs siècle*, ed. Jean-Louis Cabanès, et. al. Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2005, 17-24.
- Edmond & Jules de Goncourt, *L’Art du dix-huitième siècle*, 2 vols. Paris: Rapilly, Librairie et marchand d’estampes, 1873-4.
- Edmond & Jules de Goncourt, *L’Art du dix-huitième siècle*, 3 vols (1: Watteau, Chardin, La Tour, Boucher, 1881); (2: Greuze, Les Saint-Aubin, Gravelot, Cochin, 1882); (3: Eisen, Moreau, Debucourt, Fragonard, Prud’hon, 1882A). Paris: Georges Charpentier, 1880-2.
- Edmond & Jules de Goncourt, “Preface”, *La Peinture à l’exposition de 1855* (1855), in *Préfaces et manifestes littéraires*, ed. Jean Ajalbert. Paris: Flammarion & Fasquelle, 1926A, 205-6.
- Edmond & Jules de Goncourt, “Préface”, *Portraits intimes du dix-huitième siècle* (1857-8), in *Préfaces et manifestes littéraires*, ed. Jean Ajalbert. Flammarion & Fasquelle, 1926B, 161-7.
- Edmond & Jules de Goncourt, “Nouvelle préface de *L’Histoire de la société française pendant la Révolution et pendant le Directoire*” (1864), in Jean Ajalbert, ed. Flammarion & Fasquelle, 1926C, 158-9.
- Edmond & Jules de Goncourt, “Préface”, *Les Frères Zemganno* (1879), in Jean Ajalbert, ed. Flammarion & Fasquelle, 1926D, 51-8.

- Edmond & Jules de Goncourt, *Journal*, ed. Robert Ricatte, 3 vols. Paris: Fasquelle, 1956.
- Edmond de Goncourt, *La Faustin* (1882), in *La Fille Elisa/La Faustin*, ed. Herbert Juin. Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1979.
- Edmond de Goncourt, *Chérie* (1884), eds, Jean-Louis Cabanès and Philippe Hamon. Jaignes: La Chasse au Snark, 2002.
- Edmond de Goncourt, *La Maison d'un artiste*, 2 vols (1881), eds Christine Galantaris and Dominique Pety. Dijon: Echelle de Jacob, 2003.
- Edmond & Jules de Goncourt, *Correspondance générale (1843-62)*. Paris: H. Champion, 2004.
- Hippolyte Taine, *Essai sur Tite-Live*. Paris: Hachette, 1860.
- Hippolyte Taine, "Racine", *Essais de critique et d'histoire*. Paris: Hachette, 1905, 100-65.
- Hippolyte Taine, *Voyage en Italie*, 2 vols (1866). Paris: Hachette, 1924.
- Pierre Larousse, "Décadence". In *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, t. 6 (1870). Geneva-Paris: Slatkine, 1982, 205-8.
- Roger Marx (ed.), *Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, Etudes d'Art*. Paris: Librairie des bibliophiles, 1893.
- Dominique Pety, *Les Goncourt et la collection*. Geneva: Droz, 2003
- Jerrold E. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Geneviève Sicotte, "La Maison-texte de Goncourt", *Image & Narrative: Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative*, "House, Text, Museum", 16 (February 2006), n.p.
- Debra Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1989.
- Seymour O. Simches, *Le Romantisme et le goût esthétique du XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964.
- Juliet Simpson, "Edmond de Goncourt's décors – Towards the Symbolist *maison d'art*", *Romance Studies*, 29: 1 (January 2011), 1-18.
- Bernard Vouilloux, *L'Art des Goncourts: Une esthétique du style*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997.

Biographical note

Juliet Simpson is Professor and Personal Chair in Art History and Visual Culture at Buckinghamshire New University, UK. She is an international expert in French and European *fin-de-siècle*, Symbolist and early twentieth-century art cultures, art writings and visual culture. Her extensive publications in these areas include books on *Aurier Symbolism and the Visual Arts* (1999), *Jules Flandrin: the Other "Fin-de-Siècle"* (2001) (with Carol Adlam), *Critical Exchange: Art Criticism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Russia and Western Europe* (2009), and most recently, articles on Zola's Impressionist art criticism; Mallarmé and English Aesthetic art; Edmond de Goncourt's Symbolist "Décors" and Art Histories and the Nation State in Early Third-Republic France. Her current projects include a book in progress on "Art, Art Critics and Publics in *Fin-de-Siècle* France" (supported in its

speculative stages by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship) and an article on Bourget's Oxford Aesthetes: Towards Decadent Cosmpolitanism, for 2012-13.

E: jsimps01@bucks.ac.uk

Summary

As avid collectors of French eighteenth-century art, the Goncourts' contribution to its nineteenth-century history is well-known. This article, however, explores a less well-documented aspect of their *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle* (1858-1875): that is, its articulation of an art of latency and decadence prior to the term's *fin-de-siècle* association with explicitly transgressive cultures of modernity. Indeed, the paper argues that the Goncourts were amongst the first writers of their age to use the art of an age linked with political and cultural decay, to foreground latently decadent tendencies in mid nineteenth-century French art and culture. In so doing, they were to produce a paradigm of "decadence" defining not decline, but a new and highly modern artistry of heightened aesthetic expression. The article will explore these ideas in two principal ways. First, it considers neglected relations between the Goncourts' and Taine's ideas on art, and specifically, the Goncourts' use and exploitation of Taine's indicators of decadence, broached in Taine's study on La Fontaine (1861), for opposing artistically and culturally productive ends. Second it develops these ideas in a discussion of the three artist-studies in *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle* in which the Goncourts' developing theme of "decadence" is articulated with especial force and prescience: in "Boucher" (1861), "Greuze" (1863) and 'Fragonard' (1864). These, as the paper argues, suggest particularly defined channels for the Goncourts' engagement with key Taine's ideas of the period, offering related opportunities for their promotion of corruption, vice and decline as aesthetically and culturally compelling. In repositioning Boucher's sensualism as "indécence", Greuze's "innocence" as "perverse" and Fragonard's Italianate expressivity as "impure", the Goncourts not only situate their "histories" in the vanguard of a new, transgressive aesthetic understanding of eighteenth-century art, they re-appropriate its Romantically exquisite aspects as emblems of an art of exquisite corruption and as triggers for recreation.

Key words

Eighteenth-century art, decadence, revival, collection, *modernité*, transgression, *décor*, artifice, decoration, performance