

**REFLECTIONS OF THE FRENCH ART
BETWEEN THE MID-19TH AND THE EARLY
20TH CENTURIES IN VINCENTE
MINNELLI'S FILMS**



**Creative and
Performing Arts**

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Abstract

This paper examines and presents some heretofore familiar, as well as new suppositions: one being the influence of the French art between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries on two films by Vincente Minnelli directed in the 1950s – *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Gigi* (1958). Following a brief discussion on some biographical details that may have been the reason for Minnelli's affection for such art, and the development of his career, what follows is an overview of the production of both films, and more importantly an analysis of the references to art that shaped their visual component, while simultaneously attempting to disclose possible reasons for their appearance.

1. Introduction

Fine art has undoubtedly left a great mark on the entire history of film, but its significance in shaping it might have not been recognized to the extent that it deserves. Either as the inspiration for the visual aspect conceived to hold an audience's attention or necessary aid in the narrative techniques of a film's plot, the presence of fine art has become an inevitable companion in both the professional and personal development of many filmmakers. This undoubtedly applies to Vincente Minnelli, a film director whose name cannot and should not be omitted in any serious overview of the musicals produced during Hollywood's Golden Age. The roots of Minnelli's road to success that can be traced back to his childhood, introduce us to the very reasons of his connection to art and its production, and simultaneously allow us to comprehend how and why certain quotes from art managed to find their way to the silver screen. Among the entire body of his work, cinematic reflections of fine art are particularly apparent in two of his films from the period of the 1950s – *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Gigi* (1958). Moreover, both films are intertwined with works of art that are in various ways associated with France and its artistic legacy from between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, yet in certain respects they transverse both that geographical and temporal barrier. Of these two films, *An American in Paris* stands out as one of the director's most recognizable films and has caught the eye of a number of scholars who have exerted effort in analyzing the film's visual component. This has resulted in research that has proposed parallels with the works of certain French artists, enabling and supporting further discussions and interpretations of Minnelli's cinematic world. In *Gigi*, Minnelli takes us back to Paris, unifying both the period and locale which he was so fond of, thus creating another celebrated musical that finally brought him the renown which had evaded him until that point.

2. Vincente Minnelli and His Affection for Art

Regardless of his relatively late venture as a filmmaker, the early years of one of Hollywood's most prominent artists and musical geniuses serve as a good indicator why the appearance of fine art was not only present throughout a great deal of his work, but also why it left such a vivid trace in his filmmaking style. Minnelli's childhood was considerably distant from the *milieu* commonly associated with high culture; nevertheless, an early exposure to the performing arts, in this case performances by a traveling theatre company under his family's direction, must have provided the impetus in bridging the difference between a need to express his affection for art, and to give voice to his own views on filmmaking, as well as an inevitable necessity to conform to the mass tastes. Minnelli's first serious attempts were purely commercial, yet were also connected to some of the greatest names in the world of art: as Minnelli, "Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol... were at one time or another designers of shop windows" (Naremore, 1993, pp.13-14).

Minnelli did not have to wait long for success in theatrical production. After employment as "a designer of stage settings for the Balaban and Katz chain of movie palaces" (*ibid.*, p.2), Minnelli moved from Chicago to New York where he began work for the Paramount Theatre "as designer of both costume and scenery" (De la Roche, 1959, p.2). But real success was yet to come – the success that would eventually lead him westward, to Hollywood. According to Catherine De la Roche, after making Radio City Music Hall his new home, Minnelli's progress was fast, and here he exerted his efforts on what would soon become one of the most recognizable aspects of his filmmaking – directing stage shows that included dance sequences (*ibid.*, p.2).

De la Roche also reveals that even at this stage of his career Minnelli never hesitated to accommodate art movements and artists he found interesting and relevant, also incorporating, for example, elements of "surrealism and modern art" in "his stage version of *Ziegfeld Follies*" (*ibid.*, p.2), which, according to Stephen Harvey, also included set pieces painted by the founder of the Metaphysical art movement Giorgio de Chirico (1990, p.35). De Chirico's representations of urban architecture in juxtaposition with often unexpected inanimate objects, rare human figures, long shadows, and choice of palette were evoked by Minnelli in his films: de Chirico's paintings often remind the viewer of elaborate stage sets, making it no wonder that Minnelli would use them in his work. Among other references from the history of art, Harvey makes mention of Raoul Dufy, whose style would later be evoked in one of the sets for the dream sequence in *An American in Paris*, as well as references to the French rococo painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and even the Japanese printmaker Hokusai (*ibid.*, pp.30-35). Minnelli's ascent to stardom in Hollywood, however, was not instant.⁷

⁷ According to Naremore, Minnelli's first Hollywood venture under Paramount was in 1937, but it was short-lived – after only six months spent on the West Coast, during which several of his projects did not move from the initial conceptual stage, the director must have realized that his ideas were far from what the demands in Hollywood were at the time; cf. Naremore, 1993, pp.24-25.

In 1940 he finally caught the attention of MGM's producer Arthur Freed, who eventually became one of his regular associates. Their mutual understanding might have owed to the fact that both were serious art aficionados: Freed had work by Georges Rouault in his possession; Rouault being an artist whose work belonged to the Fauvist movement, the works of which greatly figured in their 1951 collaborative effort *An American in Paris* (Koresky, 2014). This collaboration provided MGM, a studio that had, in time, become a factory in every sense of the word – lacking a true artistic vision and failing to deliver creativity to the silver screen – a completely new lease of life (Naremore, 1993, p.25).

Similar to his approach in theatre, one very prominent aspect of his filmmaking style was the citation of the works of art by artists which he was fond of. Moreover, it appears that such inspiring “intruders” followed Minnelli throughout his entire career. Naremore refers to the Impressionist painters whose work Minnelli had the opportunity to see at the Art Institute, followed by the Postimpressionists, Art Nouveau, or even more demanding art such as was produced by the Surrealists: these works would often be used to evoke a bygone era (1993, p.10-17). Indeed, many of Minnelli's films are period pieces. The total of fourteen musical films Minnelli made at MGM in the 1940s and 1950s are set in the nineteenth century (Hext, 2014., p.60). However, Minnelli does not offer us a faithful depiction of this period, but a somewhat sugarcoated ‘Disneyfied’ version, existing nowhere but in the author's utopian ideal (ibid., p.58-60). Nevertheless, as Minnelli's work borrowed and interpreted from the artists of that period, he had the liberty of reimagining this epoch, most likely in order to make it more appealing to his target audience that sought escape from the mundane. Yet Minnelli had never wanted to limit himself, making use of more than one particular style, movement, or artist. His open-mindedness led him to be a modern patron of unconventional artists, and he “helped finance some of the experimental films by artists like Man Ray and Hans Richter” (De la Roche, 1959, p.2). To a certain extent, this role as patron reminds us somewhat of Nina Foch's character Milo, who in *An American in Paris* put all her effort in promoting the work of aspiring painter Jerry Mulligan, and here Minnelli also demonstrated his readiness to go against mainstream filmmaking. If we were to evaluate such procedures based on our general knowledge of Minnelli's overall *oeuvre*, while ignoring his equal fondness for both conventional and unconventional approaches to art and his never-ending desire to pursue a career in painting, it would be a mistake to claim that this was something unexpected from this mainstream film director. Experimental films, such as Man Ray's 1927 *Emak-Bakia*, are more like a collage of materials representing an unusual juxtaposition of objects and characters than something a regular moviegoer would pay to see, as they also avoid the narrative style that was almost omnipresent in this period of classic Hollywood's cinema. Certainly, many of these early experimental films made by the two artists mentioned earlier were made years before Minnelli began his career in film. Nevertheless, it is interesting that details from Man Ray's biography reveal that in 1921 he left the USA to try his luck in Paris (“Man Ray,” n.d.), as did the main character in Minnelli's famed film *An American in Paris*. Hence, despite no visual traces of Man Ray's experiments in Minnelli's films, one can assume that he still managed to inspire Minnelli, even if it only formed the basis for one of his most recognizable male characters.

3. On Their Way to Paris – Story about *An American in Paris*

The film that has almost become a synonym for Minnelli's filmmaking career since its initial release, *An American in Paris*, is one of the finest examples of Hollywood's approach to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as its production involved different forms of art, most notably dance, music, design, etc. However, as such, it was certainly a group collaboration including a group of individuals who pursued the creation of something new, fresh, and original; an integration of their talents, skills, and inspirations.

Arthur Freed, the film's producer, initiated the idea of "a film combining... the art of French impressionists and the music of the late George Gershwin" (*'S Wonderful*, 2008, 00:02:24). A fiction film following a former American soldier in pursuit of a career in art and love on the streets of Paris, seemed to work perfectly as a way to pay tribute to the aforementioned musician, without the need to film another biopic about his life. Moreover, it was Gershwin who "studied painting in Paris, and... wrote the suite 'An American in Paris' about himself" (*'S Wonderful*, 2008, 00:02:52), which ended up being the basis for the main character Jerry. Gene Kelly arrived during production, and not only brought Jerry to life with his charismatic stage persona, but also contributed to the dynamic of the film with his dazzling choreography, as well as other creative suggestions; one such suggestion was to cast the unknown French dancer Leslie Caron which made her a new rising star in Hollywood (Harvey, 1990, p.97). However, Vincente Minnelli was the one who gathered all the pieces of the puzzle, and provided the film with the flavor for which it is known. Despite his strong desire, Minnelli never succeeded as an actual painter,⁸ so he probably could not resist taking part in this project, as he had certainly been able to relate to it. Bearing in mind his affinity for French art and fine art in general (of which Freed must have been completely aware), the role of film director could not have gone to anyone else.

Unfortunately, even this did not lead Minnelli to Paris, a city that was somehow always out of his reach. Despite initial attempts to film on location, the picturesque cobbled streets and centuries old façades of the City of Lights was recreated in California (*ibid.*, p.98). The presence of the actual city itself takes up but little screen time, as only short excerpts appeared in the final cut. Although it is quite obvious at times that the actors are surrounded by set-pieces, and not the actual locations, this does not diminish our impressions of Paris, as Minnelli compensates the lack of its real-life charm with attention to detail and evocations that only support our existing notion of it. It took three days for Minnelli, Kelly, and Irene Sharaff, who worked on the film as designer, to find the perfect solution for the scene that would eventually become one of the most iconic moments in the history of the American film musical: what followed was the merger of "classical and American dance with sets and costumes inspired by the art of Dufy, Renoir, Utrillo, Rousseau, Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec" (*'S Wonderful*, 2008, 00:30:11) in what Johnson refers to as "a sort of choreographic essay" (1959, p.33).

⁸ Minnelli "harbored a desire to become a painter (in Paris, if possible)" (Naremore, 1993, p.10).

And indeed, it was an essay in which words were replaced by cunningly conceived dance moves in evenly brilliant sets which all celebrated the suite by Gershwin that initially inspired them. The entire scene reminded one of theatre, which is no wonder considering Minnelli's professional background.

4. A Prelude to a Dream – Analysis of Art Quotes Before the Dream Sequence

When analyzing art quotes in *An American in Paris*, the grandiose dance sequence in which Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron lead us towards the film's finale always predominates in discussions of the visual identity of this film, or the film in general. This is because of the way in which this sequence brings to life works of art, constituting, in a sense, Paris as seen through the eyes of their creators. However, it is also quite important to observe what preceded this as it represents the "real" world that forms the basis of the dream sequence and provides us with certain hints of what is to occur, but with a greater self-conscious artistry.

The establishing shot at the very beginning of the film takes us to the Place de la Concorde that will return later as one of the first set designs in the dream sequence in Raoul Dufy's characteristic style. Even Jerry's humble room where we first meet him hints at what can be expected – a book titled *Dufy* can be seen on the table, the walls are replete with paintings resembling those of Maurice Utrillo, revealing a painter who has not yet found his true expression, relying on his role models in hope of reaching the same level of success. Moreover, in the moments prior to the dream sequence, he finally reveals that he "came to Paris to study and to paint it... because Utrillo did, and Lautrec did, and Rouault did" (Minnelli, 1951, 1:32:36).

Unlike Minnelli, who certainly did not limit his artistic interests, Angela Dalle-Vache argues that Jerry appears to be rather unwilling to accept art that is anything but conventional (1992, p.78). According to the same author, this can be noticed in the scene where "Jerry pokes fun at a canvas reminiscent of Miró by demonstrating that, with abstract art it is difficult to know which end is up" (ibid., p.78). He may, however, be subconsciously aware of the fact that his art will not secure the position in the art-scene for which he longs, perhaps running away from the opportunity for success provided him by the rich patron Milo in return for his affections; in fact, accepting this would mean that he has somehow failed as a painter, as, at the beginning of the film, he states that "if you can't paint in Paris give up and marry the boss' daughter" (Minnelli, 1951, 0:02:24). Jerry eventually takes Milo's offer and agrees to an exhibition in three months during which he produces several canvases resembling those on the walls of his room at the beginning of the film, and the ones seen in the Montmartre. Most of those paintings were uninspiring cityscapes resembling Utrillo's works, with the addition of several still-lives and portraits, including one depicting Lise. However, one sequence reveals Jerry in front of Théâtre National de l'Opéra transferring it on a canvas in various shades of yellow. Although we do not have the opportunity to see it again in the episode when he begins selecting frames for the exhibition, the painting of the theatre is rather important, as it indicates the theatre's reappearance in Jerry's dream sequence as one of the sets dedicated to Van Gogh.

As was the case of several of the artists who had preceded him, Jerry sought his ascent of the art-world on the streets of the Montmartre. The street of Jerry's attempts to gain a foothold by exhibiting his paintings seems in close proximity to the part of the actual street Maurice Utrillo depicted in his *La Rue Norvins a Montmartre* (1910), with both painting and set design revealing the recognizable dome of La Basilique du Sacré Cœur de Montmartre rising above the surrounding residential and commercial architecture of the neighborhood. While the aforementioned part of Norvins street as seen in Utrillo's painting remains almost intact even today, the street Jerry set foot on every day appears to be nothing more than a collage of certain architectural elements that succeeds in deceiving the viewer into thinking that one has really been transported to the real-life Montmartre.



Figure 1. Minnelli, V. (1951). *An American in Paris* [Still from the film (18:57)]; Utrillo, M. (1910). *La Rue Norvins a Montmartre*. [Painting]. Mutual Art. <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/LA-RUE-NORVINS-A-MONTMARTRE/812E29157F2D236E> (20 Sept 2022)

Three individual dream sequences occur during the course of the film, conveying the viewer colorful realms that reflect the emotions or unachieved desires of the film's three prominent male characters – the singer Henri Baurel as he talks about his infatuation for Lise, the unemployed concert pianist Adam Cook as he dreams about his frantic and euphoric concert, and finally Jerry as he chases Lise while reminiscing on the art of Paris. Apart from Jerry's dream, only Adam's dream bears some influence related to an artist who will appear later in Jerry's dream – Raoul Dufy. In his dream, represented as a concert of classical music, Adam's role is not one of an individual musician alone, but an entire orchestra, conductor, as well as admiring audience. Although Dalle-Vacche suggests that “Dufy's experiment with ‘tonal painting’ for his *Red Concert* (1946)” resembles “Minnelli's dramatic lighting and his extensive use of bronze and black shadows” (1992, p.76),⁹ the artist painted more than one painting with the same or similar motif in the second half of the 1940s.

⁹ The same author also mentions works by Edgar Degas as a possible model for Adam's concert scene; cf. Dalle-Vacche, 1992, p.68.

Dufy's *The Red Concert* from 1946, *Concerto, Piano and Orchestra*, also from 1946, *The Red Orchestra* (1946-1949), or *At the Concert* from 1948 convey the somewhat hazy atmosphere in which both musicians and audience, represented as dark figures, are emphasized in a music hall illuminated in a shade of red as the one seen in Minnelli's films. However, color-wise, Dufy's compositions such as *The Full Orchestra* (1946) and *The Great Concert* (1948) fit Adam's dream sequence better as they contain a great amount of yellow that has the power to convey the non-existent realm in which Adam frantically tries to achieve his aspirations (Hext, 2011, pp.2-8).

The final scene prior to Jerry's dream sequence takes place at a New Year's Eve Art Students Ball. In terms of color, the entire set and costume design were based on nothing more than black and white, which can be considered a coloristic pause before the upcoming outburst of color. Although they are evidently set in two different time periods, and they visually mirror only the contrast between dark and light, the Black-and-White Ball and Édouard Manet's 1873 painting *The Masked Ball at the Opera* share some similar content. What is interesting, though, is that the exhibition history of the National Gallery of Art in Washington (which owns this Manet painting) lists the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris as the location of its first public exposition in 1884 ("Masked Ball", n.d.). This is the same school of art where the students organized the Black-and-White Ball, which even at the time of the film's release was a tradition dating to the 19th century (Shaw, 2013). As Shaw also reveals, celebrations such as the one we encounter in Minnelli's film were a perfect occasion for students to indulge in entertainments that were likely considered deviant and socially unacceptable. Certainly, Minnelli's Ball was less ribald than balls as these often were due to the Production Code, and also because it was unnecessary for this scene to be too explicit, as the nature of such entertainments were easily implied. Concerning Manet's painting therein is a depiction of wild celebration in which the amorality of high society is on display: in it are members who embarked incognito in what were possibly inappropriate relations with other attendees ("Masked Ball", n.d.). Such an emotionally stranded environment may have served as the perfect contrast with the following scene which focuses on Jerry's sincere feelings for Lise in the form of a dance taking place in the various locations over an artistically reimagined Paris.

5. Cardboard Paris of Jerry's Dreams – Analysis of Art Quotes in the Dream Sequence

Before Lise's departure with Henri, and the beginnings of his dream, Jerry creates a monochrome drawing in the style of Raoul Dufy leading us directly into the dream and also serving as the first piece of set design. The drawing is not simply a copy of any of Raoul Dufy's works, but a composition based on his signature sketchy style of drawing.

According to Dalle-Vacche, Raoul Dufy's *The Gate* from 1930 and *The Park of Saint-Claude* from 1924 may have served as models (1992, pp.69-70). However, once compared to the actual scenes in the film, only the latter shows some minor compositional similarities. This is perhaps noticeable in the way it reflects the depiction of architecture in the park such as the high

pedestals holding public sculptures, as well as the tall, thick and rounded trees, the foliage of which appears to overshadow the street that narrows and leads towards what appears to be the Arc de Triomphe, thus creating an illusion of depth. The set design remains monochrome until Jerry picks up a red rose from the floor, the rose being a recurring motif throughout the entire film. Suddenly, as the colors emerge, red and white Furies take Jerry to the Place de la Concorde designed to resemble a number of paintings of the same square by Raoul Dufy, as well as his younger brother Jean. While the entire set is colored primarily in subtle shades of blue with splashes of turquoise and a dash of yellow, the scene is filled with various characters dressed in different shades of red, blue, and white: this is most likely a representation of France, Jerry's adopted country. The colors in general are evidently less vibrant than those that can be found in the paintings of both Dufy brothers, but they still manage to retain the impression of the city in the works of these two Fauvist painters.

Upon leaving Place de la Concorde, the camera leads us to the flower market located directly in front of the Pont Neuf, represented as similar to Pierre-Auguste Renoir's 1872 depiction, yet immersed in a gloomier tone, unlike Renoir's airy and spring-like palette.¹⁰

The background reveals a similar representation of the bridge's architecture with black street lights on its parapets and tall buildings with windows overlooking the Seine and mansard roofs. While Renoir's bridge is filled with pedestrians and vehicles, Minnelli fills them with human figures and places them in the space of the flower market. However, they are motionless throughout this entire segment of the sequence, as if they were a part of a set: the observer is thus provided with the impression of Jerry walking into an everyday scene from the past as it was represented by the brush of one of the most renowned painters.

Jerry soon finds himself in the middle of a street which appears as one painted by his idol Maurice Utrillo. The set, the colors of which are made up of a slightly washed-out and rather subtle palette with the occasional coloristic accents characteristic of Utrillo's cityscapes, follows from where the previous segment left us, as there is a hint of melancholy in it. What one can also notice is that Minnelli repeats the pattern of four dancers interacting with the main character – with four Furies from the beginning of the sequence now being replaced by four American soldiers. Unlike the first instance which sees Jerry attempting to escape the Furies, he progresses through the segment of this sequence, and after an initial lack of interest, Jerry willingly joins the soldiers as they storm into a clothing shop.

The latter serves not only as a device for costume change, but also as a transition to the following segment of the sequence dedicated to the Fauvist painter Henri Rousseau, with patterns and colors that will soon reappear with greater emphasis. In this instance, Rousseau is present in the form of a collage of isolated elements from his paintings.

¹⁰ De la Roche mentions Renoir as a possible source of inspiration for the set design in the flower market scene; cf. De la Roche, 1959, p.23.

After the flower garden segment, the set design once again shows larger parts of urban architecture in the background. Tall buildings with simple rectangular windows and dark colored roofs with many chimneys are in this scene, as well as the silhouette of the *Notre Dame* which entirely dominates the entire set, and this is a definite reference to *Notre Dame: View of the Ile Saint Louis From the Quai Henri IV* from 1909, as it reveals quite similar cityscape. Another dominant element of this set design is abundant greenery, a characteristic Rousseau's motif. The tall trees separating the architecture depicted in the background and the central part of the set provide a sense of depth to the space and may have their source in the aforementioned painting. On the other hand, the vegetation surrounding the center of the set where Jerry performs a tap dance with Lise and other supporting assemble, appears as if derived from paintings such as *The Dream* and *Exotic Landscape*, both from 1910. Both paintings show trees with rounded and pointy dark green leaves symmetrically placed along thin branches twisted under the pressure of oranges. This choice of set design should not come as a surprise as it is located near cardboard cut-outs of the wild animals that usually inhabit such compositions. Interestingly, the most noticeable among them – the lion, was from *The Sleeping Gypsy* from 1897, a painting without any representation of vegetation.



Figure 2. Minnelli, V. (1951). *An American in Paris* [Still from the film (1:44:42)]; Rousseau, H. (1909). *Notre Dame: View of the Ile Saint-Louis from the Quai Henri IV*. [Painting]. WikiArt. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/henri-rousseau/notre-dame-view-of-the-ile-saint-louis-from-the-quai-henri-iv-1909> (20 Sept 2022)

Following the lively tap dance, Jerry and Lise return us to the fountain on the Place de la Concorde. Amid the yellow, blue, and red light radiating through the mist around the fountain, the two characters interact in a gentle and sensual dance without any unnecessary vulgarity. The square in front of Théâtre National de l'Opéra that appeared earlier in the film suddenly takes over the set. Yellow, as well as shades of orange provide warmth to the visuals, reminding us of Vincent Van Gogh's canvases. Moreover, all architecture in this scene appears as if built out of energetic and short brushstrokes characteristic of this painter's technique. Furthermore, another famous element from his painting is visible in the background – the swirly stars from *The Starry Night* (1889), here covering the entire sky in a rhythmic exchange of yellow and orange strokes, rather than against the cobalt blue of the sky.

The brief Van Gogh segment is swiftly replaced with a celebration of another artist – Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. A man wearing a cardboard advertisement of this artist’s exhibition turns around displaying Lautrec’s *Chocolat Dansant* from 1896, and Jerry imitates the pose of the dancer in Lautrec’s picture, transforming him into the exact replica of what was portrayed on the cardboard. Having passing cardboard figures that are direct quotes of the artist’s 1895 painting *Booth of La Goulue at the Foire du Trone (Dance at the Moulin Rouge)*, Jerry reaches a cabaret table and waves at a man whose physical appearance and garments reveal he is no other than Toulouse-Lautrec himself in the company of two female characters that often appear in his art – Jane Avril and Yvette Guilbert. Both of them are portrayed in the artist’s *Divan Japonais* (1893); however, in Minnelli’s film Jane Avril mimics the original representation with greater exaggeration, sitting in her long black gown and elaborate hat, watching the show. Yvette’s film depiction is closer to the portrait bearing her name, *Yvette Guilbert* (1895), as seen in her facial expression and the bright yellow of her dress and to that in *Yvette Guilbert Taking a Curtain Call* (1894) regarding the design of her dress. In both instances she is wearing conspicuously long black gloves and has bright red hair, also emphasizing her presence in this scene.

There is another familiar figure from one of Lautrec’s works opposite to them – Aristide Bruant, as depicted in the posters titled *Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant in his Cabaret* (1982) and *Aristide Bruant in his Cabaret* (1893) wearing a black coat, black hat and a vibrant red scarf. Interestingly enough, all three of them were known as performers, yet in here they are in the audience witnessing Jerry’s dance, with Lise dressed as Jane Avril in the 1893 poster of the same name, and can-can dancers loosely resembling those in *Mademoiselle Eglantine’s Troupe* (1896). As Jerry and Lise leave off the stage and approach the audience, *At the Moulin Rouge* (1892-1895) serves as the backdrop of the cabaret set, while singer May Milton briefly intrudes the scene with her face lit in the same manner as in the artist’s painting. The end of the dance sequence takes us back to the Place de la Concorde where, after concluding that he has finally won her heart, Jerry again loses Lise just like the set loses its colors and becomes Jerry’s monochrome drawing again.

6. Gigi, a Belle Époque Girl – The Story About Gigi

After *An American in Paris* in 1951, the late 1950s provided Vincente Minnelli with the opportunity to set sail for France once again. The reason why Paris had again become one of the main characters in a Hollywood, or (better said) MGM film, was to inform the backdrop of a coming-of-age tale of a young and innocent girl, who at the turn of the century learns to understand the meaning of love while avoiding the lessons about seduction given her by her more experienced aunt and grandmother. The original novella was penned by the French author Colette in 1944, whose basis for *Gigi* was the real-life story about a girl trained to win a rich man’s heart by her two courtesan aunts, only to outwit them both, as well as her beau, who eventually proposed to marriage (Crawford, Feltenstein & Smith, 2008).

Before *Gigi's* Hollywood debut in 1958, a French film production of the same name appeared in 1948, as well as a Broadway play which introduced none other than Audrey Hepburn (ibid.). Colette proposed Hepburn herself, but when Arthur Freed decided to bring the story to the silver screen a several years later, the actress was no longer interested in reappearing as a French teenage *cocotté-to-be* (Harvey, 1990, pp.139-141). However, Hepburn would later take on a similar role in the film adaptation of the 1956 Broadway production of *My Fair Lady* and this sparked Freed's attention, and this led him to Alan Jay Lerner whom he envisioned as the screenwriter of his future film, with Minnelli as director (ibid., p.140). With Hepburn's exit, Freed found a solution for the title character in Leslie Caron, who debuted in Minnelli's *An American in Paris*. Due to her appearance of physical innocence and her playfulness, she was certainly remembered by audiences who saw her in her 1951 film debut, so Caron was perfect to play the role of a teenage girl, despite being in her mid-twenties during the shooting of the film.

Even the premise of the story, with its amoral connotations, was somewhat beyond the moral framework of the Production Code, and although there was struggle and much persuading, Freed had enough credibility to get the censors on his side (Crawford, Feltenstein & Smith, 2008). Unlike *An American in Paris* in which Gene Kelly danced and sang on artificial Parisian streets, *Gigi* was Minnelli's true opportunity to incorporate the City of Lights in one of his films.¹¹ The importance of the city's presence is such that authors such as Hugh Fordin claim that "Paris is a character in the movie" (Crawford, Feltenstein & Smith, 2008, 00:21:00), although the task of depicting its *Belle Époque* period proved to be more demanding as the city had already been greatly modernized. Even though various locations and buildings undoubtedly aided in the recreation of this epoch, this venture proved to be far too expensive for the studio so it eventually ordered the film crew to return to Hollywood where the costs would be less (Harvey, 1990, p.142). In the end, despite being no longer able to incorporate the real Paris in his film, Minnelli's product was much closer to his own vision of this city than its actual depiction (Koresky, 2014). Nevertheless, such an interpretation fits perfectly into the musical version of the story, providing it with a theatrical charm that few directors could hope to match.

When compared to *An American in Paris*, *Gigi* is as colorful and visually appealing, yet displaying a greater (false) sophistication, while avoiding extravagant dance scenes (Robinson, 2015). Moreover, it has some of the qualities of a comedy as Frederic Loewe's songs contribute to the comedic atmosphere which the actors convey, unobtrusively accompanying the plot from beginning to end. When the musical began to decline, with the advent of television as the new and preferred medium for entertainment, *Gigi* succeeded in reaching new levels of success unlike any other film of its kind produced in the same period (Crawford, Feltenstein & Smith, 2008). In April of 1959, *Gigi* took the Academy Awards by storm, winning nine golden statues and surpassing the success of *An American in Paris*, and bringing Minnelli his long-awaited recognition from the industry.

¹¹ Minnelli also had the opportunity to portray Paris in his 1956 film *Lust for Life*; however, the film did not extensively focus on this segment of Vincent van Gogh's life, and the majority of scenes were filmed in interiors built on a soundstage.

7. Minnelli's Revival of Parisian *Belle Époque* Amorality

Knowing of both Freed and Minnelli's appreciation of fine art, Minnelli's predilection for the period in which *Gigi*'s story takes place, and references to the visual arts in *An American in Paris*, it was no surprise that the Paris of 1900 would be represented by the art that recalled this glorious era of the city's history. However, unlike *An American in Paris*, in which art became the media through which the main character's unrealized dreams materialized before our eyes, the references to art in *Gigi* are not as apparent. Certainly, this France's artistic legacy is missing from the film. Apart from the opening credits in which Georges Goursat's caricatures are quoted directly, other quotes and references linger throughout the film, yet also manage to evoke the atmosphere of the era depicted in the film, at the same time making us ponder the original sources.



Figure 3. Minnelli, V. (1958). *An American in Paris* [Still from the film (00:26, 0:36)]

Sometimes a film's opening credits play a larger part than the average filmgoer might suspect. And while the average contemporary consumer of classic Hollywood cinema might not focus attention on the list of names that appear in the early minutes of a film, anxiously awaiting the real action to begin, ignoring such in *Gigi* would certainly be a mistake. The reason for this is not that the movie-goer might extract some information in these few minutes of text, but because what appears in the background in the opening credits is important. When deciphered appropriately, *Gigi*'s opening credits allow the viewer to comprehend the film's overall tone as Georges Goursat's lithographies fulfill this role better than would the art of any other artist of the period in which the film is set. What Goursat (better known under his pseudonym SEM) offered with his *oeuvre* of caricatures was a humorous take on high society, often ridiculing its members ("Sem George", n.d.). The way Goursat cunningly mocked aged bachelors, married men engaged in morally questionable affairs, and women often making laughingstocks of themselves by trying to gain their appreciation, was warmly embraced by the authors of the film who created characters and events that a contemporary spectator can hardly take seriously, despite such people being close to the truth. Besides Goursat's comedic undertones, the visual component of his caricatures may have also been adapted by the filmmakers – mostly as a basis for the appearance of the socialites in this film, as well as locales where they dwelled, but also in terms of its color scheme, somewhat close to Minnelli's use of color on the big screen, which is more than evident in the scenes that follow.

As narrator, or perhaps commentator on the main actions in the film, Maurice Chevalier's confirmed bachelor Honore Lachaille welcomes the spectators to the Paris of 1900, his witty introduction hinting at a glimpse of the amorality that underlies the entire film. This period is known as the *Belle Époque*, which, according to Philippe Jullian, began in 1900 and ended with the beginning of the Great War of 1914, though some historians trace its beginning to the second half of the 19th century in order to include certain artistic movements such as Impressionism (1982, p.6). An extended time frame allows us to look back further toward the world of painters such as Renoir, Manet or Seurat, from whom the film's creative team may have borrowed certain details in order to evoke a world of leisure and flirtation, and with great effect in scenes such as those in the Bois de Boulogne. Although they cannot be entirely ascertained as the direct references in this film, there are still traces of their work in Minnelli's portrayal of this period.

Visually, Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-1886) could not be less akin to the film's overall visuals, yet a sense of carefree leisure predominates in the scene where Honore Lachaille thanks heaven for little girls. Seurat's painting portrays women in day dresses with bonnets on their heads, holding parasols in a manner that barely protected their skin from the sun's rays. The same may be said of the women positioned firmly in their chairs by Minnelli, observing passengers as little girls playfully run around them, reminding us of some of the more relaxed and lighthearted scenes of leisure as framed by Renoir. Such daily entertainments were not uncommon in the Paris of the past, a period in which the City of Lights was rife within its various forms, which is something that *Gigi*, despite the sense of decorum found therein, is brave enough to demonstrate (Jullian, 1982, p.30).

One of the most prominent set designs where various events during the entire film take place definitely evokes yet another art reference – the residence of Gigi's family, i.e. of her grandmother and mother whom we only hear singing, which is something of a running gag throughout the film. The décor of the family apartment with its clear parallels to Henri Matisse's *The Dessert: Harmony in Red* from 1908, is one of the film's links to the world of art. This resemblance is particularly owing to a daring use of a rich shade of red, also corresponding to the numerous instances of such color in Minnelli's: this color is used sometimes in lighting or sometimes in entire sets. Similarly, as Matisse portrayed his red room with decorative elements in darker shades of blue and green, and sudden flashes of bright yellow in his depiction of food and flowers, Minnelli achieved a comparable effect in the set design of the front room, with the dark brown varnish of the furniture, the golden details of decorations in the background and the chandelier, etc. Even the appearance of Gigi's grandmother recalls Matisse, especially the colors of her attires, and her hair fixed in a high bun. As the grandmother is seen only in her apartment, the reference to Matisse's painting comes as no surprise.



Figure 4. Minnelli, V. (1958). *An American in Paris* [Still from the film (15:19)]; Matisse, H. (1908). *The Dessert: Harmony in Red*. Henri Matisse. www.henrimatisse.org/the-dessert-harmony-in-red.jsp#. (20 Sept 2022)

Johnson mentions both Renoir and Manet as possible references in the scenes set in Trouville (1959, pp.39-41), while Harvey points to Boudin as the artist who inspired the same scenes (1990, p.147). However, neither mentions the works that might have served as source material. In Eugène-Louis Boudin's *oeuvre* there are several depictions of Trouville (e.g. *Beach at Trouville*, 1863), many of which include beaches populated with well-dressed people at leisure, similar to what can be seen in the film. Boudin's almost powder-like palette wraps his figures in the misty atmosphere of the seaside, and this is recognizable in Minnelli's color scheme in the segments when there is an increase in the affections of the two protagonists from innocent friendship toward a more serious relationship. Similar motives such as those in Manet's *On the Beach* (1873) or Renoir's *Figures on the Beach* (1890) also play a part in these scenes.

As in many coming-of-age films, *Gigi* offers us a rather fast take on the main character's progress from a playful teenager to young woman ready to be wed, both in order to fulfill her relatives' expectations, and to find her own happiness. The Gigi we meet at the beginning of the film loosely resembles one of the *Two Sisters* in Renoir's 1881 work, primarily in how Gigi's emerald coat and oversized hat match the attire of the older sister, yet also how the figures interact with the greenery in the park surrounding them. As the film progresses, we are introduced to a changed character whose newborn femininity and seductiveness are manifest in the scene at Maxim's, with reference to the women portrayed by John Singer Sargent. Among the portraits that show certain similarities with Gigi's new grace are *Madame X* (1883-84), whose gown matches Gigi's in shape, though not in color, and *Ena and Betty, Daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Asher Wertheimer* (1901), where the visual component of one of the sisters looms large. What is more important, though, than the number of correspondences, is how Minnelli portrayed her as gentle as Sargent, with Gigi now a gracious young woman rather than a *coquette* seeking nothing but attention during one of her visits at Maxim's.

8. Conclusion

Although his career in film business was neither as long and productive as the careers of other directors whose work defined what is today known as the Golden Age of Hollywood, Vincente Minnelli's rightful place in Hollywood Hall of Fame cannot be denied. His biography, sometimes of greater interest simply for the life rather than for the professional engagements, resembled a proper screenplay, and it was evident early on that his abilities and interests would sooner or later find a creative outlet. His later career unfortunately led him away from the world of high art in which he had to make a breakthrough, yet his profound interest and understanding of both art and artists never entirely left him, a possible escape from the harsh reality that was not overly kind to him.

Minnelli's fondness for art movements, some of which had little appeal for American audiences, provided him with the opportunity to further explore the possibilities of both theatre and cinema. The lives of artists and their personal struggles was a topic Minnelli was especially keen to adapt on the silver screen, as these were themes that were, to a certain extent, a device for expressing his own sense of discontent, yet this was a discontent that he eventually turned into success. Fine art had not only influenced how Minnelli incorporated references to art in theatre and films, but how he approached the many technical aspects of filmmaking: he approached them almost as if he were a painter. This provided his films with their special visual splendor.

The two films included in this paper, their connection to the world of fine art and their plot and setting, at first do not seem to have much in common. However, regardless of some initial differences, what connects them is how they offer audiences a completely new way to experience fine art, which is very much in the spirit of Minnelli's cinematic world. The presence of fine art in his films is manifested in several different ways: *An American in Paris* introduces the audience to the daily struggles of an unsuccessful artist as he tries to attain success in the Paris art world, imitating the great artists Minnelli cleverly inserts in the film either as uninspiring canvases, or sets that remind us of their works, the greatness of which the film's protagonist may never attain. The most impressive manifestation of fine art in this film is certainly its climax, i.e. the spectacular seventeen and a half minute dance sequence which reimagines the City of Lights in set-pieces that revive the style of several famous painters, with a theatricality many directors could not have achieved. *Gigi*'s use of fine art, however, demonstrates Minnelli's strongest suit – taking fine art as a basis, then building the rest of the film on reminiscences which achieve an authentic image of the era depicted, or at least making us believe its authenticity.

While the majority of art references featured in these two films belongs to the time period mentioned in the title of this paper, there are several examples that violate such a description, mainly the works of Raoul Dufy in *An American in Paris* or our suggested John Singer Sargent's influence in *Gigi*. However, their presence only adds to a better understanding of Minnelli's broad views on art.

Although the flavor of his films might not necessarily cater to the needs of a contemporary audience accustomed to wafer-thin stories and spectacle, Vincente Minnelli's work still displays visuals of high quality that are a match to the accomplishments of modern cinema. This has been achieved as Minnelli managed to unify several arts into a successful whole, and had managed to attain and understand the role he had desired his entire life – the one of an artist.

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Figure 1

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Figure 2

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Figure 3

Minnelli, V. (1958). *An American in Paris* [Still from the film (00:26, 0:36)]

Figure 4

Minnelli, V. (1958). *An American in Paris* [Still from the film (15:19)]; Matisse, H. (1908). *The Dessert: Harmony in Red*. Henri Matisse. www.henrimatisse.org/the-dessert-harmony-in-red.jsp#. (20 Sept 2022)