



HAL
open science

Not to be seen. Sordid aspects of prostitutions in illustrations.

Claire Dupin de Beyssat

► **To cite this version:**

Claire Dupin de Beyssat. Not to be seen. Sordid aspects of prostitutions in illustrations.. City of Sin : Representing the Urban Underbelly in the Nineteenth Century, Rijksmuseum, May 2016, Amsterdam, Netherlands. hal-02059049

HAL Id: hal-02059049

<https://hal.science/hal-02059049>

Submitted on 6 Mar 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

City of Sin : Representing the Urban Underbelly in the Nineteenth Century,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 19 et 20 mai 2016.

Claire DUPIN DE BEYSSAT

NOT TO BE SEEN

Sordid aspects of prostitutions in illustrations

“Prostitutes are as inevitable in a great urban centre as are sewers, roads and rubbish dumps; [it is thus necessary] to avoid by all possible means the inconveniences which are inherent to them, and, to that end, to hide them, to relegate them to the darkest corners, in short, to make their presence go as unnoticed as possible.” This sentence is from Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, first to study prostitution as a phenomenon both social and political. More than his surveys, his recommendations form the basis of the regulationist system, instituted in France in the 1840s and then adopted all around Europe. Its main goal was to control prostitution: at this time, even if necessary, prostitution was not to be seen.

However, in the second half of the 19th century, prostitution appears in artistic or literary representations. Publications started to describe the realities of prostitution by diverse means: songs, novels and short stories, testimonies and scientific papers. In art, prostitution became a motif used to modernize traditional genres or to add some excitement to more and more pompous compositions. Yet, it seems that contemporary prostitution is in itself was an audacious enough subject that artists were not willing to paint its dirtiest aspects. The major works of art would lead one to think that loneliness and boredom are the two most unpleasant situations a prostitute can endure. To find representations of the crudest aspects of prostitution, such as misery, exploitation, repression, disease and violence, one has to seek through illustrations, as those kind of depiction do exist there.

Most of these pictures date from the end of the 19th century, it is to say from the 1880s and 90s. The explanation is simple: in those decades, illustrations became easier to make and publish, and therefore soon appeared in most of the medias. After the liberalization of the press in 1881,

newspapers were allowed to put every opinion into texts but also to publish new kinds of images. In parallel, editors continue to publish books with more frequent illustrations and of higher qualities. Actually, most of the illustrations newly produced used these improvements, be it technical or be it judiciary, to present comic or erotic pictures. This is particularly true with prostitution as a subject. But some supports distinguish themselves by representing prostitution also through its most despicable aspects. Those images, being rare, are quite unknown: it is these that I would like to study with you today.

First of all, these illustrations come from different types of publications. They are not the doing of a sole editor, writer or artist, even if they are mostly signed by few authors known for their preliminary engagement. In fact, most of them are from Théophile Steinlen, whose political and social commitment is today well known and studied. Indignant to the strong injustices of his time, he has denounced them through his art and represented numerous types of misery, among them the sordid realities of prostitution. Steinlen's images constitute the majority of this corpus, which comes as no surprise, as it is the result of the convergence of his concerns with the social and political tendencies of the publication he illustrated.

Most of the images I present were published in press publications belonging to boulevardière culture: *Le Gil Blas illustré* and *Le Courrier français*. Born in 1891, *Le Gil Blas illustré* was a derivative of *Le Gil Blas*, and was given to the readers every Sunday. It was directed by René Maizeroy, and the line, even if more entertaining, was close to the one of the original newspaper: a moderate republicanism, sensitive to the social questions. This commitment is well visible when one studies the authors and illustrators published in their pages. Most of the short stories are signed by author close to the naturalistic movement: Jean Richepin, Gustave Coquiot, Oscar Méténier or Camille Lémonnier, among others. *Le Courrier français*, also a weekly paper, was directed by Jules Roques and was more bound to the culture of Montmartre, where prostitution soon become part of social and political claims. Regarding illustrations, Théophile Steinlen appears to be the dedicated illustrator of *Le Gil Blas illustré*, in the company of Balluriau and Albert Guillaume, whereas *Le Courrier Français* is illustrated by Adolphe Willette, Henri Rivière, Ferdinand Lunel and others. But those are not the only press publication to be interested in prostitution. In fact, *La Petite Rosse* is a weekly review published by and for prostitutes. Its director is Gaby la Bordelaise and it presented itself as "Gazette féministe et demi-mondaine". Unknown today, as are their writers and illustrators, the publication proposes yet an original view on prostitution, not

abolitionist but quite virulent against procurers and clients. Coherently, illustrations which appear on the cover and inside the pages often denounce the work and life conditions of prostitutes.

The second major source for those representations are songs illustrations. As social song becomes more and more appreciated at the end of the century, with its dedicated places and the growing of its audience, it will soon be subjected to illustrated publishing, within newspapers or as a booklet. Among them, the ones by Aristide Bruant are the most virulent against prostitution and are usually illustrated by Steinlen. The two of them share closed convictions regarding social injustices and, among them, exploitations inherent to prostitution. Other artists depicted the phenomenon as well, including women describing their life as a prostitute, through songs and the accompanying illustrations.

The last main source is novels, which become more and more frequently illustrated at the end of the century. Therefore, as a great number of them deal with prostitution, numerous images are produced, sometimes representing its crudest aspects. The illustrations by Jean-Louis Forain for *Marthe histoire d'une fille*, from Huysmans, are well known, but many novels by Zola – not only *Nana* – and other prostitution novels, such as *La Traite des Blanches* from Dubut de Laforest or *Nathalie Madoré* by Abel Hermant were illustrated too. In those cases, illustrations could be used as an advertising poster or as the cover, and the artist should then tempt the audience without altering the story told. Within the book, illustrations were placed by choice of the editor, and they must depict what is written in the immediately previous or following pages. Yet, the illustrators are not entirely passive, as they had to compose an original picture at the same time appealing for the readers and faithful to the text. However, some artists choose to stay close to the crudest situations described in the novels, and represented the particularly harsh living and working conditions of the prostitutes, heroines of those novels.

As those images are bound physically to texts, being nearby or following, it is necessary to ask whether the illustrators remain faithfully to the situations described in the original text. Most of them do: sometimes, the link is even reinforced by a quote, which acts as a caption. It is the case of the illustrations of *L'Assommoir* and *Nana* from Zola. With the text this close, artists have to keep most of the elements originally present in it and, more important, need to put into image a one line-caption. Regarding the songs, be it published in a booklet or in a press publication, illustrations appear next to the verses. They are not, properly speaking, a caption but are easy and quick enough

for the reader to recognize the accuracy of the image to the text. For instance, for “A Saint Lazare”, Steinlen multiply the signs that help identify the hospital-prison: bar on windows, religious outfits, line of inmates. Indeed, most of the time, illustrators try to respect the place and time of the narration and to include all the characters. It is also the case when the image is not immediately nearby the text and there is no caption, as for the covers of *Le Gil Blas illustré*.

Even when they stay faithful to the texts they illustrate, artists need to make choices so that the transcription is both coherent and harmonious. In fact, these short stories and songs often stage more than one situation, forcing the illustrators to choose which one they are going to put into image. It is then interesting to see that artists often favour the saddest passages. It is the case in the illustration of the song “Fille” from Ivanof, appearing in *Le Gil Blas illustré* from February the 11th, 1894, which is much more pessimistic than the text. The artist only represents a street walker, roaming the cold night, choosing to ignore the passage where the prostitute joins a customer in a warmed room and is truly loved by him. Sometimes, the interpretation of the illustrator, without being unfaithful to the text, lets a criticism shine through: while the song “Les Municipaux” details several situations where the absurd stubbornness of the gendarmes is made obvious, Balluriau rather show the violent arrest of a prostitute only. Much in the same way, “Monsieur Bart” short story is organized around the figure of the eponymous police captain in the vice unit, in charge of questioning and restoring the girls taken during the police roundups and raids to their families. Despite that, the illustration, by Jean Pauwels, very clearly favours the representation of the arrested prostitutes waiting in front of his office.

There are also certain images which have little or no link with the text they illustrate. The artist goes considerably off the original story to propose his own representation of prostitution, even if the phenomenon has not been mentioned in the text. It is in particular the case of the illustration of “Le regard vers l’amour inconnu” from Guy de Téramond. Whereas the short story tells the gallant meeting between a bourgeois and a miserable wife, Steinlen chooses to represent a woman tempted by prostitution, symbolized by the house with a large number and by the men waiting in front of it. The example is all the more striking in “La Conversion d’Angèle”: Claude Berton writes about a high-society dinner party, whereas the artist represents, without any link with the text, a quarrel between cocottes. It is thus the illustrators’ choice to show prostitution even if not asked: this can be interpreted as the sign that prostitution is omnipresent in popular culture, and is latent in every narration dealing with seduction or misery.

In fact, prostitution through its harshest aspect is also represented in pictures not really illustrative. Those compositions can be found inside the newspaper pages, such as *Le Courrier français*, where illustrations appear alone and have no link to the published texts. However, those representations are bound to the editorial line adopted by the publication, and consequently by its writers and illustrators. As said before, *Le Courrier français* along with *Le Gil Blas illustré* treat prostitution as a phenomenon both entertaining and deplorable. It is then no surprise to see that sometimes, their illustrators need no text to deal with the unpleasant face of prostitution. Those images are easily read, as they use most of the times a caption to highlight their intention. They use quite schematic composition, opposing in stark contrast the poverty of the prostitutes to the comfort of the bourgeoisie.

In order to be easily understood by the reader, most of the artist don't hesitate to create iconographic types to represent some characters. This results from a visual tradition, from the caricatures to the illustrated physiologies, but also from the constitution of types in literature. Even if progressive, artists, both literary and visual, tend to contain the prostitution phenomenon by applying to its actors a representation grid. Illustrators form no exceptions, and even used it to denounce the miserable aspects of prostitution.

Besides the prostitute, clients and procurers both take parts in prostitution as well. To represent them, illustrators rapidly adopt a proper look for each and make them easily recognizable by their attributes. As such, the madam is the character whose treatment is the most caricatural. She is depicted as a corpulent middle-aged woman, taller than the young women – even girls – she is talking to. Her dominance is emphasized by the richness of her toilet and finery. Often associated to the maternal figure, she can also be likened to an octopus, whose tentacles symbolize the pressure which she exercises on the girls, and given an openly sinister face - if, that is, they did not paint a beard on her. For his part, the customer is most of the time represented as a bourgeois, recognizable by his top hat - an omnipresent item in the painted images of prostitution too. By favouring bourgeois over working-class clients, illustrators insist on both sexual and economic domination. In fact, compositions often oppose a prostitute represented alone, young and obviously poor (as shown by her clothes) and several men, acting like predators, dressed in sophisticated clothes, monocles and walking sticks. By contrast, the procurer appears essentially as a man originating from the lower classes. He wears the beret, a short coat - probably from standardized stores - and

cheap shoes. Everything thus indicates that he arises from the same class as the prostitute who he "protects", and he actually plays a role more akin to the one of a lover. But artists insist on his ambivalence and deceit: the face of the pimp is often emaciated and shows no emotion, when it is not simply hidden. Indeed, artists do not ignore the underlying exploitation, and stage, *via* the composition or the legend, the interest which he pulls out of this relation. Thanks to those relatively fixed iconographic types, each character plays a well-defined role, in both the visual composition and the narration illustrated.

On the other hand, the treatment of the prostitute figure in illustrations has little to do with caricature. In the same way as illustrators use the types defined in literature, this is also due to the authors who, most of the time, don't characterise the prostitute they write or sing about. Both texts and images of prostitutes refer to no particular persons: from then on, the suffering they endure is not individual and isolated, but affects the whole prostitutional population. But, whereas a writer can give no depiction and name to his character, illustrators have to assign a body. Therefore, even if they do personify prostitutes, artists often refuse to draw them a precise face and their expressions appear strangely neutral. However, prostitutes are not just a symbol, and they are represented in wide diversity of morphology, hair colour or situations. Diversity favours the recognition of the girls' individuality, which goes against the wide-spread opinion at the time of a prostitutional essence which would be shared by a homogeneous population. The prostitutes are also humanized through the harshness of the shown situations, which makes the reader / spectator feel an instinctive pity towards the girls. In fact, thanks to the absence of a real iconographic type, artists multiply subtle back-and-forces between individualization and iconisation of the prostitute. On this point, it is necessary to notice that the prostitute, even if personalized, is, in the great majority of the images, isolated and embodies the prostitutional figure by herself. This way, illustrators can join in a sole picture the denunciation of the work and living condition of the prostitutes with the claim that those women are not to be relegated into the background: they are rather humans and victims of a system of sexual and economic domination directed toward them.

Apart from this, artists also use many tools particular to the illustrative lithography. First among these is the integration of the image to the page, which forces artists to consider its various elements (titles, texts, dedicated space) and to favour synthetic compositions and colours. The various illustrations by Steinlen for the song "Les Marcheuses" from Aristide Bruant offer a perfect

example of their versatility. The illustration of the song's booklet underlines the loneliness of the street walkers. Far from investing all the space of the page, the artist confines his illustration in a medallion where the street walker seems alone, roaming at night. The representation insists also on the absurdity of their condition, by missing to show potential clients. In the version appeared in *Le Gil Blas illustré*, the treatment is similar. Steinlen contain the prostitute in a long and vertical space, that stress her thinness and isolate her from the rest of the page. He also shows the extent and the gravity of the prostitutionnal phenomenon, by depicting numerous silhouette in black in the background of the image. The same effect is used in the illustration published in *Le Mirliton*, but much more advanced. Here, the image invests all of the page, living just the minimum space to the text. The image is extremely synthesized - the girls are no more than silhouettes wandering on the pavements - and composed around lighting and colours effects. Steinlen refuse to depict a proper narration but succeed in creating an ambiance, perfectly coherent to the illustrated text. The artist proposes thus a variation around Bruant's song that invests the iconography of the street walker at night, often used to depict misery. Indeed, numerous contemporary testimonies and historic studies insists on the rarity of jobs for women and on the poor incomes, which urge numerous women to resort to prostitution to fulfil their needs. Therefore, this "heure du gaz", admirably represented by Steinlen, was the time where prostitutes could roam the pavements to accost future clients, which they did in huge number.

Black is also used to picture uniforms and to signify the omnipresence of the police. In fact, the regulationnist system was particularly repressive to the prostitutes, who are treated more like criminals than victims. To depict the harassment of which the girls were victims, artists do not hesitate to stage in a rather caricatural way a row of gendarmes watching the prostitute's every move, who seems not to be the most threatening individual. But the most spectacular aspect of the repressive system is the roundup, of which the illustrators represent the violence by resorting to heavy and dynamic compositions. They also underline the injustice and the humiliation felt by the prostitutes, by reducing them to silhouettes surrounded by black uniforms.

Colour itself appears rarely in these illustrations, as the technique or the economy of the publication don't permit it: the internal pages of newspapers and of books were hardly ever in colour. However, some covers of *Le Gil Blas illustré* make a strong use of colours, especially red: when used, those colours most of the rime signify violence. First, violence is aimed to the prostitutes: some illustrations represent them facing prospect or real violence of their customers,

thus revealing their vulnerability. There, red serves to show the inherent danger of their conditions. But the prostitutes themselves are not exempt from violent behaviour, as shown by some illustrations. Here, colours and patterns from the prostitutes' clothes reveal their vanity, as their job is to seduce. But they are also used to highlight the dynamism of certain situations. In both these pictures, Steinlen depict a fight between two prostitutes, even though of different social classes. This points out the despair inherent to prostitutes' business: whatever their status, they cannot allow themselves to lose a single customer. But mainly, it shows how colours is used to represent the two faces of prostitution: the entertaining one and the threatening one.

The corpus which I have just analysed is naturally not exhaustive. It certainly shows that representations of the harshest aspects of prostitution exist, but it also shows the rarity of this kind of depictions. The stark contrast between those images and the ones we are used to see and study is thus illuminating. It underlines the fact that popular culture and high art had favoured a more sensual and exciting view of the prostitution, that is yet contradictory to the realities of the phenomenon largely described in testimonies and in essays.