# Corners of Love and Death: Probing into a Modern Obsession

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J'ai vingt-deux ans; je ne suis pas vierge. – Hélas! on ne l'est plus à cet âge-là, maintenant, ni de corps, – ni de cœur, – ce qui est bien pis. Ouire celles qui font plaisir aux gens pour la somme et qui ne doivent pas plus compter qu'un rêve lascif, j'ai bien eu par-ci par-là, dans quelque coin obscur, quelques femmes honnêtes ou à peu près …

—Théophile Gautier, *Madame de Maupin*, Paris 1835, bk. 1, ch. 1, 93.[1]

[I am twenty-two; I am not a virgin. Alas! Nowadays, one no longer is a virgin at this age, neither in body nor in heart, which is far worse. Apart from those women who give pleasure to young men for money and who should count no more than a lascivious dream, I have certainly had here and there, in some dark corner, a few honest or almost honest women.]

## Preamble

The street corner has always been a key geographical marker, a public stage for social, political and commercial interaction. During the long nineteenth century, however, the enclosed corners of rooms, gardens and squares, as well as remote geographical 'corners', became important sites of revelation and intimacy, often transgressive and amorous. In what can only be called a corner cult, the corner became a zone where authenticity, identity, difference and desire could be asserted. By the same token, the corner could be a marker of marginalisation and punishment, especially of women, children, the poor, foreigners, colonised peoples and Jews. In Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), an English yeoman compares Isaac of York to a spider, 'which might be overlooked while he kept in a corner, but would be crushed if it ventured into the light'.[2] As punishment for claiming to have seen a ghost in the graveyard, a schoolboy in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman*

[1] Théophile Gautier, *Romans, contes et nouvelles*, ed. Pierre Laubriet (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 1:251. My translation. Translations are my own if there is no citation of a published translation.

[2] Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe; a Romance*, vol. 8 in *The Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels*, ed. Graham Tulloch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 70, 180–1.

*in White* (1859–60) has to stand apart 'from all the rest on a stool in a corner – a forlorn little Crusoe, isolated in his own desert island of solitary penal disgrace'.[3]

Some of these issues are manifest in a sombre realist poem written by the painter Émile Bernard while living in the remote Breton port village of Saint-Briac. Bernard sent it to Vincent van Gogh in faraway Arles, accompanied by a coloured drawing showing a crowded corner in a tavern-cum-brothel.

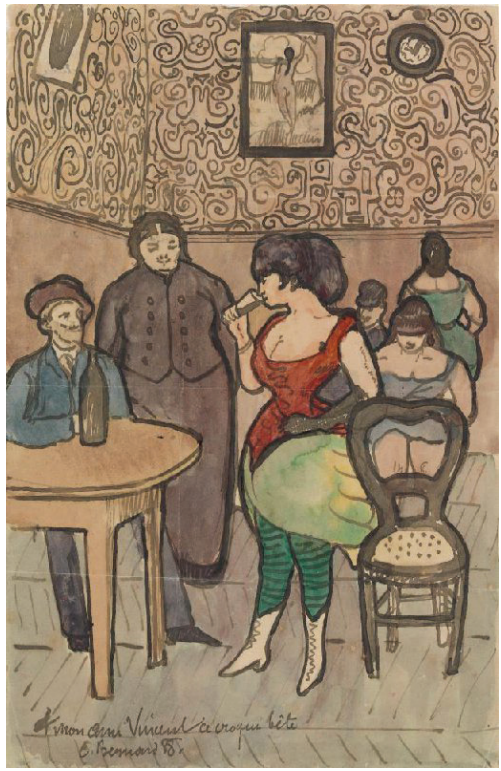

**Figure 4.1.** Émile Bernard, *Brothel Scene*, 1888, reed pen and brush and ink and watercolour on paper, 31 x 20 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).

It opens:

C'est dans un coin très retiré
Un cabaret sombre qu'attriste
Le jour bas d'un volet tiré.

[3] Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 84 (ch. xii).

La marchande est specialiste
Et vend comme en un débit clair
De la boisson et de la chair …

[It's in a faraway corner,
A dark tavern saddened
By the feeble light of a closed shutter.

The tradeswoman's a specialist
And sells, as in an open open trade,
Both drink and flesh …][4]

Both painters were regular brothel users and had been discussing how much sex a male artist could safely have without impairing their genius, so the sentimental tone is somewhat hypocritical. In the illustration, the brothel owner stands proudly in the corner, the dado rail exploding powerfully from her head like devil's horns or spider's web. Bernard calls her a specialist because she has, as it were, cornered the sex market in Saint-Briac. Bernard inscribed the drawing ambiguously: 'A mon ami Vincent ce croqui bête' [To my friend Vincent this bestial/brutal sketch]. The dandyish seated client is probably Bernard himself.[5] Van Gogh was an ideal recipient as he fully appreciated the romantic allure of the corner. It is a realm for love and intimacy more than for disgust or lust, just as Gautier's 'coin obsur' in the epigraph is used for assignations with honest women. In the summer of 1882, Vincent had written to his brother Theo, insisting he could find beauty in the filthiest corner, just as he could find tranquillity in his own troubled life:

Al is het dat ik dikwijls in de beroerdigheid zit toch is er binnen in mij een kalme, reine harmonie en muziek. In het armste huisje, in het smerigste hoekje zie ik schilderijen of teekeningen. En als met onweerstaanbaren aandrang gaat mijn geest die rigting uit.

[Even though I'm often in a mess, inside me there's still a calm, pure harmony and music. In the poorest little house, in the filthiest corner, I see paintings or drawings. And as if with an irresistible urge, my spirit runs in that direction.][6]

Especially before the arrival of electric light, corners were often dark and dirty. Zones of mystery, fantasy, fear, disease and dirt, the supernatural and unconscious,

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4 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Letters. The complete, illustrated and annotated edition*, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker, 6 vols. (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum / Huygens ING, 2009). Online edition: <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/>. No. 630, 23 June 1888.

5 Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, Émile Bernard (1868–1941): The theme of bordellos and prostitutes in turn-of-the-century French art (Rutgers: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1988), 3, 13–15; Richard Thomson et al., Easy virtue: prostitution in French art 1850–1910 (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2016), 106, 109, 176.

6 Van Gogh, The Letters, no. 249, 21 July 1882.

they were repositories for discarded fragments of natural and human history, havens and cemeteries for pests and insects. In 1882, the 'filthiest corner' had a major love component because it encompassed van Gogh's mistress Sien, a destitute sex worker he hoped to 'rescue' by marriage. She (or another sex worker) had given him the gonorrhoea for which he had just been treated in hospital. In the same letter, he says he has made a drawing of the child's cradle. Sien was about to give birth to the child of a previous client.

The corner cult of the long nineteenth century has been largely overlooked, and never examined systematically or historically. Gaston Bachelard's brief chapter on corners in The Poetics of Space (1958) is suggestive – 'le plus sordide des refuges'– but perfunctory and largely confined to passages from twentieth-century poets.[7] Martin Warnke highlighted the 'Sofaecke' [sofa corner] as a twentieth-century German bourgeois ideal, but overlooked its long European history.[8] Daniel Jutte's 'Towards a History of the Corner' is far more wide-ranging historically and thematically, but largely concerned with street corners and external corners of buildings.[9] None of these writers showed full awareness of the depth, breadth and history of the corner cult, or mentioned its key literary champion, Émile Zola.

The corner cult had concrete manifestations. Architects and interior designers created cosy, lazy, poetic, Indian and Turkish corners, bay windows, corner towers and turrets, nests, dens, caves, alcoves, recesses, nooks, inglenooks and chimney corners. These spaces often had bespoke seating, and plump cushions in a purported oriental style to encourage romantic languor and reverie.[10] Japanese and decoupage folding screens created moveable corners. Towards the end of the century some makers of 'artistic' furniture specialised in cosy corners, providing bespoke sofas and display cabinets.[11] Mrs J. E. Panton's Nooks and Corners (1889) was a guide to household management and interior decoration for professional married couples.[12] Panton's 'Winter Corner', an oriental enclave next to the

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7 Gaston Bachelard, La poétique de l'espace (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2012), 131. The Poetics of Space. trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 136–47.

8 Martin Warnke, 'Zur Situation der Couchecke', in Stichworte zur 'Geistigen Situation der Zeit', ed. Jurgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,1979), 675–76.

9 Daniel Jutte, 'Toward a History of the Corner', Res, 73/74 (2020), 340–56

10 Stefan Muthesius, The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-century Domestic Interior (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 257–64; Charlotte Gere and Lesley Hoskins, The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2000), passim and figs. 64, 75, 90, 117, 118.

11 J. S. Henry, <https://bifmo.furniturehistorysociety.org/entry/henry-j-s-1878–1911>.

12 Gere and Hoskins, The House Beautiful, 80–1, 114–5.

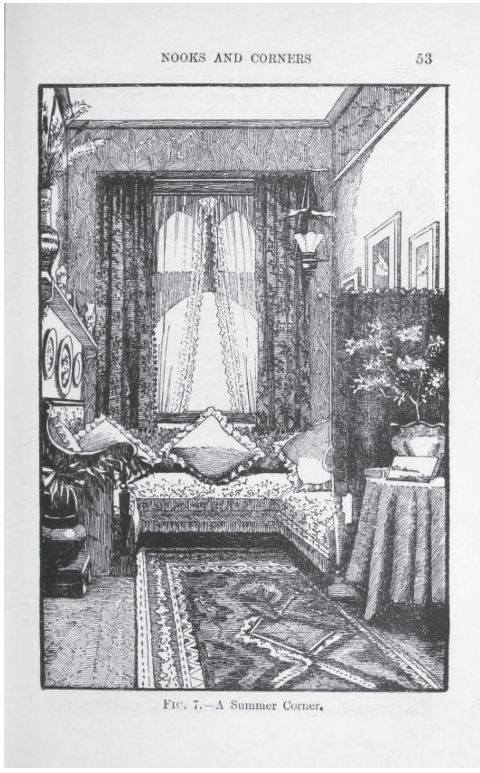


**Figure 4.2.** *A Summer Corner*, from J. E. Panton, *Nooks and Corners*, London 1889. Figure 5, 53.

fireplace, featured a cabinet for porcelain, made by Mr Smee; an adapted second-hand sofa was a 'special favourite of Max, the tabby cat, who much resents being moved therefrom'.[13] Here, the cosy corner was also a cat lover's corner.

New picture types appeared entitled 'Corner of the Room/Studio/Village/Field/Farm', and countless corner-centred pictures with more general titles. Frank Millet's A Cosey Corner (1884), painted while the American was living in the Cotswolds, England, is a carefully contrived erotic fantasy loosely based on the kitchen in his New England studio. (Figure 4.4) A pretty young woman dressed in a flowery Indian chintz dress in eighteenth-century style, is warmed by fire and caressed by sun. She loses herself in a book we presume to be romantic rather than religious. Her languid feline stretch recalls the more strenuous

[13] J. E. Panton, Nooks and Corners (London, Ward & Downey, 1889), 59, and figs. 4.2, 4.3.


**Figure 4.3.** *A Winter Corner*, from J. E. Panton, *Nooks and Corners*, London 1889. Figure 8, 60.

arched body of John Everett Millais's Mariana (Tate, 1851), pining alone in her bay window for the fiancé who has rejected her.[14] In Tennyson's eponymous poem, inspired by Measure for Measure, Mariana says: 'My life is dreary, / He cometh not' (l.9–10). The apples on Frank Millet's grate suggest multiple temptations; the rifle suspended on the beam, alongside the 'male' corkscrew and pipe, implies patriarchal control and retribution.

Disorientating 'close-up' fragments of an invisible whole, corner pictures could overturn the post-Renaissance convention whereby the back wall of a room was parallel to the picture plane, with figures and objects spread out rationally as in a frieze or tableau. These enclaves satisfied what the essayist Leigh Hunt called the

[14] Elisabeth Prettejohn, The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), 10–13.

**Figure 4.4.** Frank Millet, *A Cosey Corner*. 1884. Oil on canvas. 92.1 x 61.6 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of George I. Seney, 1887, public domain.

'corner-loving mood of the mind'.[15] To this end, new buildings multiplied and maximised corners – cosy on a sunny day, scary on a dark stormy night, unless accompanied by a lover (Figure 4.5).

In what follows, I propose to sketch out briefly some of the key aspects of the erotic corner cult as manifested in literature and the visual arts, mainly focusing on north European examples. I will begin with Denis Diderot's celebration of corners in his writings on art from 1765/7, and end with Danish symbolist painter Wilhelm Hammershøi's moody 'woman/stove in the corner' pictures of circa 1900. I will broadly chart a shift from a euphoric libertine attitude to the corner, manifest in Rococo art, design and architecture, to

[15] Leigh Hunt, A Book for a Corner; Or, Selections in Prose and Verse from Authors the Best Suited to that Mode (New York: Puttenham, 1852), 176.

**Figure 4.5.** James Wyatt and James Thornton, Belvoir Castle, 1799–1832. David P. Howard.

the more troubled nineteenth-century approach where the corner is a zone of love and death, simultaneously utopian and dystopian. As such, the corner became the perfect hunting ground for haunted Gothic, realist and puritanical imaginations.

## Rococo corners

During his essay review of the Paris Salon of 1767, Diderot offered a deliberately provocative definition of artistic inspiration while describing a romantic pastoral scene, now lost, by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince.[16] A young man and woman were listening to music in the countryside. Diderot can only praise the head of the musician, but he observes how often a single beautiful passage, idea or event in music, literature and history, can make him forget the mediocrity of the rest. This echoes his first discussion of Le Prince in the Salon of 1765, where he laments uninspired art lacking a single striking idea or vital line. To this end, he can

[16] Diderot, Salons. III, Ruines et paysages: Salons de 1767, ed. Else Marie Bukdahl, Michel Delon, Annette Lorenceau (Paris: Hermann, 1995), 309–12; Diderot on Art, 2 vols, trans. John Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 2:180–1.

praise artists who are distinguished by particular qualities: 'Le Sueur a son coin, Rubens le sien' [Le Sueur has a corner to himself, as does Rubens].[17]

Diderot defines inspiration in a similarly specialised way, as the revelation/recognition of a single corner, detail or fragment located at the frontier of self, world and art:

> Qu'est-ce-donc que l'inspiration? L'art de lever un pan du voile et de montrer aux hommes in coin ignoré ou plutôt oublié du monde qu'ils habitent. L'inspiré est lui-même incertain, quelquefois, si la chose qu'il annonce est une réalité ou une chimère; si elle existe jamais hors de lui; il est alors sur la dernière limite de l'energie de la nature de l'homme et à l'extrémité des resources de l'art.
>
> [What then is inspiration? The art of lifting a flap of the veil and revealing to men an ignored or rather a forgotten corner of the world they inhabit. The inspired person is sometimes himself uncertain whether the thing he makes manifest is a reality or a chimera, whether it ever existed outside of himself; he is then at the final boundary of the energy of human nature and at the extremity of the resources of art].[18]

Diderot admits his definition will strike his readers as an alibi for the most extreme poetic madness. Today, we might call it object fetishism or a precursor to Roland Barthes's photographic punctum, a specific detail that hits us emotionally.

Diderot's metaphor of the veil that needs to be lifted was commonplace in discussions of allegory and religion. Nicolas Antoine Boulanger's L'antiquité dévoilée par ses usages… [Antiquity unveiled through its customs] (1766) treated pagan religious stories as consolatory fables that veiled painful truths, often from the masses who were easily duped ((II: 38–9; III: 318, 417; I: 314; II: 90; III: 180). For Diderot, however, the exposure of 'veiled corners' has a powerful erotic component that can be sublimely overwhelming. Veils are usually associated with beautiful women who are at once real, ideal, fantastical and allegorical, preferably placed in a confined space enabling intimate one-on-one encounters. In the Salon of 1765, he describes depictions of two such women, their nudity barely concealed by transparent veils. Charles-Nicolas Cochin's drawing for an allegorical frontispiece for the first volume of Diderot's Encyclopédie (Paris 1765) comprises a heaving crowd of scantily clad female allegories. Truth stands coyly in the clouds hemmed in by Reason and Imagination. Reason, from behind, is trying to tear off [arracher] Truth's whole-body veil, while from the side

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[17] Diderot, Salon de 1765, ed. Else Marie Bukdahl and Annette Lorenceau (Paris: Hermann, 1984), 224–5; Diderot on Art, 1:123–4.

[18] Diderot, Salons. III, 311; Diderot on Art, 2:181.


**Figure 4.6.** Bonaventure-Louis Prévost after Charles-Nicolas Cochin, *Frontispiece to Diderot and d'Alambert's Encyclopédie*, 1772, etching and engraving. 37 x 24 cm. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago, public domain.

Imagination prepares to adorn Truth's naked body with a garland of flowers[19] (Figure 4.6).

Diderot had previously hyperventilated over Jean-Baptiste Greuze's painting of a young woman en négligé at a window opening mysteriously lacking shutters and glazing (Figure 4.7). She has pushed aside curtains which envelop her, overflowing the sill. The picture was commissioned by Madame de Grammont as a new-year's gift to her lover the Duc de Choiseul. The girl has just received a note from her lover and is blowing him a kiss. Diderot goes into raptures:

> Il est impossible de vous peindre toute la volupté de cette figure … quelle bouche! quelles lèvres! quelles dents! Quelle gorge! On la voit cette gorge et on la voit tout entière, quoiqu'elle soit couverte d'un voile léger. Le bras gauche… Elle est ivre, elle n'y est plus, elle ne sait plus ce qu'elle fait, ni moi presque ce que l'écris.

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[19] Diderot, Salon de 1765, 224–5; Diderot on Art, 1:182; The Encyclopedia of Diderot and d'Alembert: Collaborative Translation Project, 2002–. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library). 'frontispiece': <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/frontispiece.html>.

**Figure 4.7.** Augustin de Saint-Aubin after Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Le Baiser Envoyé*, 1807. (*Reverse*) Mezzotint. 57 x 40.4 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1960, public domain.

> [It is impossible to describe the full voluptuousness of this figure … Such a face! Such a mouth! Such lips! Such teeth! Such a bosom! We see this bosom, all of it, despite its being covered by a thin veil. The left arm… She's intoxicated, she's beside herself, she doesn't know what she's doing, nor I, almost, what I'm writing].[20]

The left arm has fallen onto a pot of flowers whose stems and leaves snake along her arm, enveloping her like the curtain opposite. She is a cornered Lady Laocöon, in ecstasy rather than agony. Her squid-like fingers are suggestively inserted between the rippled pages of the letter, caressing and splaying them, making them look labial. Here, blatantly, the most intoxicating veiled coin is le con. Diderot's rapturous account had been in keeping with the conclusion of the entry for 'VOILER' in the Encyclopédie, which he edited and partially wrote with d'Alembert: 'Le voile qui nous dérobe les objets par intervalle, sert à nos plaisirs qu'il rend plus durables & plus piquans. Le desir est caché sous le voile; levez le voile, le desir s'accroît, & le plaisir naît'. [The veil which undresses objects

[20] Diderot, Salon de 1765, 275–6; Diderot on Art, 1:155–6.


**Figure 4.8.** Pierre Chenu after Juste Aurèle Meissonnier, *Projet de l'angle d'un Sallon portatif pour le Roy en 1730. [Design for a corner of a room for the King in 1730]*, 1748, etching and engraving, 45.7 x 33.7 cm. New York, Cooper Hewitt Museum, public domain.

gradually, serves our pleasures which it makes more durable and piquant. Desire is hidden under the veil; lift the veil, desire grows and pleasure is born.][21] Diderot's *voiler* is evidently joined at the hip with *violer*, to violate and rape.

The eroticised corner was a key component of Rococo art and architecture, a zone of supreme libertine fantasy for female as well as male patrons and viewers. The corner had become increasingly 'active' and central with the publication of a treatise on architectural perspective by the Bolognese illusionist scene painter Ferdinando Galli da Bibiena, Architettura civile … (1711).[22] Bibiena described and

[21] Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et des métiers / par une Société de gens de lettres; mis en ordre et publié par M. Diderot et, quant à la partie mathématique par M. d'Alembert, 35 vols. (Paris: Briasson, 1751–1780), vol. 17 (1765), 426.

[22] Ferdinando Galli da Bibiena, L'architettura civile: preparata sú la geometria, e ridotta alle prospettive: considerazioni pratiche (Parma: Paolo Monti, 1711).

illustrated a scenographic method which he called scena per angolo [view from an angle/corner]. Rather than showing a centralised symmetrical vista down a main street, or through an interior, in the scenographic style popularised by Sebastiano Serlio, he showed buildings and streets at a raking angle with diagonal vistas. The audience stared onto and into the corners of buildings, which blockaded the space like beached architectural fragments.[23] Piranesi was one of the many artists to be inspired by Bibiena, in views of Rome and imaginary prisons. Buildings viewed from a corner, rather than front on, would be central to the ideals of Picturesque landscape.[24] Recesses, bays and corner features like turrets would take starring roles in Gothic revival architecture and Gothic novels.[25]

Juste Aurèle Meissonier eroticised the scena per angolo in his influential Livre d'Ornemens (1734), a new type of ornamental print, the morceau de fantasie, with no clear practical purpose (Figure 4.8). Abbé Jean-Bernard Le Blanc was thinking of Meissonier when he complained about designers who 'no longer observe any order, any probability, in their productions. They heap cornices, bases, columns, cascades, rushes and rocks, in a confused manner, one upon another; and in some corner of this chaos, they will place a cupid in a great fright, and have a festoon of flowers above the whole'.[26] The signal advantage of corners, especially concave ones, as opposed to flat open-ended walls, was that they could more easily evoke erotic compression, contraction and embrace. Shakespeare already implied this in The Merchant of Venice when Lorenzo warns: 'I shall grow jealous of you shortly, Launcelot, if you thus get my wife into corners' [III: 5:31–2]. Similarly, the twentieth-century term 'nooky', meaning sex, probably derives from nook. (OED) Meissonier's shell-like architecture is convulsively muscular, even orgiastic, while the flora, fauna, young women and cupids suggest hyper-fertility. Contemporaneously in England, informal gardens like Stowe had what Gilbert

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[23] Idem., 108–10, Fig. 14.

[24] William Gilpin, Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty… (London: R. Blamire, 1792), 84; Humphrey Repton, Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening (London: T. Bensley and Son, 1816), 4–5.

[25] Horace Walpole, The Castle of Otranto (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 69–70, 84; Ann Radcliffe, The Mysteries of Udolpho (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3, 6, 12, 22, 245, 253, 448; Humphrey Repton, Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening (London: T. Bensley and Son, 1816), 101–2; Edgar Allan Poe, Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe I: Tales and Sketches 1831–1842, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 662–6; Chris Brooks, The Gothic Revival (London: Phaidon, 1999) 155–87; Dale Townshend, Gothic Antiquity: History, Romance, and the Architectural Imagination, 1760–1840. (Oxford, 2019; online edn, Oxford Academic, 21 Nov. 2019), ch. 3. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198845669.001.0001>, accessed 21 Jan. 2024.

[26] Abbé le Blanc, Letters on the English and French nations…, 2 vols. (London: J. Brindley, 1747), 1:284 [translated from Lettres d'un François, 3 vols. (La Haye: Jean Naulme, 1745)]

**Figure 4.9.** Bernard II van Risenburgh, *Corner Cabinet (encoignure), one of a pair*, ca. 1745–49, oak veneered with ebony and Coromandel lacquer, cherry wood, and purplewood; gilt-bronze mounts; brocatelle marble top, 91.1 x 86.0 x 66.4 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1983, public domain.

West called 'A cool Recess … / Sacred to Love, to Mirth, and rural Play', where libertine pleasures could be privately enjoyed.[27] Peering into corners, nooks and recesses was becoming central to the genre of architectural capricci [caprices], with their evocative heaped ruins, wild vegetation, peasants and tourists.[28] The emphasis on corners and recesses chimed with the improvised perspectives in imported Far Eastern art (Figure 4.9).

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[27] Gilbert West, Stowe, The Gardens of the Right Honourable Richard Lord Viscount Cobham: Address'd to Mr Pope; To which is added, Taste: A Poem, by Mr Pope (London and Dublin: George Faulkner, 1732), 12. Reprinted 1753 and 1756.

[28] Lucien Steil ed., The Architectural Capriccio: Memory, Fantasy and Invention (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

No one has become more identified with Rococo art and style than Louis XV's mistress and confidante, Madame de Pompadour (1721–64) (Figure 4.10). The term was coined retrospectively in around 1800 by Maurice Quai, a pupil of Jacques-Louis David, who criticised effete, un-classical art as 'Van Loo, Pompadour, rococo', entering French dictionaries as a stylistic term in 1842.[29] The cognate term used in the early eighteenth century was 'rocaille', derived from the concave shells used to decorate garden grottoes. From 1736 it was used to describe the latest type of modern decoration.[30] It was thus associated with nature and with the smaller, cosier specialised spaces that were a new feature of elite dwellings and gardens.[31] Pompadour's later reputation as a frivolous stylistic arbiter was partly due to her patronage of the First Painter of the King, François Boucher, purveyor of amorous pastoral scenes and mythologies. He painted several full-length statement portraits of Pompadour in the 1750s, when her relationship with King Louis XV was becoming platonic for various reasons, including ill-health. In all but one (and in a large posthumous portrait by François-Hubert Drouais), she reclines in the corner of a room in her apartments in Versailles. In the other, she sits in the same reclining pose in a 'cosy corner' of wild woodland.[32]

The largest and most elaborate was painted when Pompadour had just been appointed lady-in-waiting to the queen. A collaborative venture, Boucher let her see the unfinished portrait. She is splendidly multi-purpose – reclining object of desire; pertly pensive femme savante; lady-in-waiting who passive-aggressively remains in the margins (the dark reflection in the mirror of the shadowed back of her head suggests this too). The oddly triangular shape formed by her silk dress and upper body implies she is a natural corner dweller, a human encoignure. Previously an architectural term for the place where two walls met, encoignure was beginning to be used for new furniture types designed to fit into corners, especially display cabinets.[33] The corner cabinet with lacquer decoration illus-

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[29] E. J. Delécluze, Louis David: son école et son temps: souvenirs (Paris: Didier, 1855), 421, 426.

[30] Colin B. Bailey, 'Was There Such a Thing as Rococo Painting in Eighteenth-Century France?', in Melissa Lee Hyde and Katie Scott, eds, Rococo Echo: Art, History and Historiography from Cochin to Coppola (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014),169–90.

[31] Katie Scott, The Rococo Interior (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); John Whitehead, French Interiors of the Eighteenth Century (London: Laurence King, 2009).

[32] E. Goodman, The Portraits of Madame de Pompadour: Celebrating the Femme Savante (Berkeley: University of California, 2000); Colin Jones, Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress (London: National Gallery, 2002); Humphrey Wine, The eighteenth-century French paintings (London: National Gallery, 2018), 187–99.

[33] Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 4th ed. (Paris: la Veuve de Bernard Brunet, 1762), 1:619; Jean-François Féraud, Dictionaire critique de la langue française (Marseille: Jean Mossy, 1787), 2:79.

**Figure 4.10.** François Boucher, Madame de Pompadour, 1756, oil on canvas. 205 x 161 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesamlungen – Alte Pinakothek München, public domain.

trated here is of a type ordered by Pompadour herself in around 1750. She half leans back on the plump cushions of a daybed, becoming a flowerbed for the pink embroidered roses adorning her blue-green silk dress and the real roses spilling onto the floor. Roses signify love; the dog, loving fidelity. She is further enclosed by a gold curtain and writing table. Her pose is nudely echoed by that of a reclining gilt bronze Cupid flanking a clock on an ornate bookcase which is darkly reflected in the large mirror behind her. It is a shadowy remembrance of her royal erotic past. The bookcase, heaped books, prints, drawings, sheet music, letters, writing and drawing implements signify her love of learning and the arts. The book resting on her lap, the pages held open by her thumb, suggests that study is the new sex; so too the open drawer of the writing table, its white feathered quill rising priapically from the ink pot, waiting to be guided firmly by her accomplished hand.

## A female foot, and a girl, in the corner

Honoré de Balzac would both exploit and ridicule the erotic corner cult in his novella, *Un Chef-d'Oeuvre Inconnu* (1831/37; The Unknown Masterpiece).[34] Corners are central to this tragi-comic melodrama set in seventeenth-century Paris. The opening scene has young aspiring painter Nicholas Poussin gate-crashing the studio of Porbus, who has painted royal portraits. Poussin enters at the same time as the living legend Frenhofer, who reminds him of a painting by Rembrandt without its frame because he walks silently, enveloped in his own dark atmosphere. Frenhofer goes on to advocate an art that is atmospheric and expressive rather than merely descriptive, redolent of Venetian art and Rembrandt. Porbus's studio has a central skylight, illuminating the easel below, but 'le jour n'atteignait pas jusqu'aux noires profondeurs des angles de cette vaste pièce' [daylight did not penetrate the black depths in the corners of this vast room].[35] It is soon apparent that corners harbour dark human truths and depths that await unveiling.

Frenhofer's own studio is dust-filled and disordered. He has been working for ten years in secret on his great masterpiece, a reclining female nude, initially painted from life from the beautiful courtesan Catherine Lescaut. Veiled by a velvet curtain, Frenhofer refuses to show his masterpiece to anyone. When Porbus and Poussin ask to view it, they are rebuffed:

> Comment ! s'écria-t-il enfin douloureusement, montrer ma créature, mon épouse ? déchirer le voile sous lequel j'ai chastement couvert mon bonheur ? Mais ce serait une horrible prostitution !…Née dans mon atelier, elle doit y rester vierge, et n'en peut sortir que vêtue.[36]
>
> [What! he cried sadly at last, exhibit my creature, my wife? tear the veil under which I have chastely covered my well being? But that would be horrible prostitution! … Born in my studio, she must remain a virgin, and only leave if clothed.]

They are only permitted to see the picture after Poussin offers up his young mistress Gillette to pose nude beside it so Frenhofer can compare a real beauty with the painted image. Gillette is disillusioned because Poussin has betrayed their love by asking her to strip for another man. Frenhofer barely gives her a glance before returning to his own painted idol. He believes he has painted a woman lying on a velvet bed hung with curtains, a tripod incense burner beside her exhaling

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[34] Pierre Laubriet, Un catéchisme esthétique: Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu de Balzac (Paris: Didier, 1961), 85–99.

[35] Honoré de Balzac, Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu, ed. René Guise, in La Comédie Humaine, vol. x: Études Philosophiques, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 415.

[36] Balzac, Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu, 431.

perfumes (this recalls Ingres's Grande Odalisque, shown at the Salon of 1819 and published as a lithograph in 1826). He goes into raptures, drunk with love like a young ingenue. His effusions resemble Diderot's over the girl at the window.

Initially, Porbus and Poussin fail to see anything except 'couleurs confusément amassées et contenues par une multitude de lignes bizarres qui forment une muraille de peinture' [colours confusingly amassed and bounded by a multitude of bizarre lines which form a wall of paint]. However, more careful inspection reveals something small but very beautiful in the bottom corner:

> ils aperçurent dans un coin de la toile le bout d'un pied nu qui sortait de ce chaos de couleurs, de tons, de nuances indécises, espèce de brouillard sans forme; mais un pied délicieux, un pied vivant ! Ils restèrent pétrifiés d'admiration devant ce fragment échappé à une incroyable, à une lente et progressive destruction. Ce pied apparaissait là comme le torse de quelque Vénus en marbre de Paros qui surgirait parmi les décombres d'une ville incendiée.[37]
>
> [They recognised in a corner of the canvas the end of a bare foot which emerged from this chaos of colours, tones, uncertain nuances, a kind of formless fog; but a delicious foot, a living foot! They remained petrified with admiration before this fragment that had escaped from an incredible, slow and progressive destruction. This foot appeared there like the torso of some Venus in Parian marble which emerged from the rubble of a burnt-down town.]

Frenhofer's picture has become an apocalyptic landscape with ruins. The only recognisable component is an extremity – a far corner of the body, as it were – located in a far corner of the canvas. It is unclear whether Frenhofer/Balzac think Lescaut's loveable foot fragment is a self-sufficient entity, the ne plus ultra of Picturesque taste. The vogue for Picturesque landscape had got people used to searching for things in the corners of pictures. In Leigh Hunt's contemporaneous essay 'Put up a Picture in your Room' (1834), he observes: 'By living with pictures we learn to "read" them, – to see into every nook and corner of a landscape, and every feature of the mind'.[38] Frenhofer is the most radical corner artist of all.

The rest of Catherine Lescaut's painted body is veiled by Frenhofer's fog of form. This is social realism insofar as a glimpse of female foot might well be as good as it got, thereby encouraging foot fetishism (Victorians, understanding the allure of feet, covered the feet of furniture). We see Madame de Pompadour's shoed feet-lets poking out cutely from under her dress in Boucher's portrait, and there are plenty of naked feet in Cochin's allegorical Frontispiece. In cult

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[37] Balzac, Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu, 436.

[38] Leigh Hunt, Essays by Leigh Hunt. The Indicator. The Seer (London: E. Moxon, 1842), pt. 2: 4.

statues, an exposed foot might be worn down by caresses and kisses. But Balzac also alludes to the subjection of real women: covered up in clothes and mostly confined to quarters. While Porbus and Poussin marvel at the foot, Poussin hears Gillette weeping, 'oubliée dans un coin' [forgotten in a corner].[39] Poussin has doubly betrayed her – by asking her to model for Frenhofer, and by being more mesmerised by art. He has never looked at her with the same devotion. Gillette is the emotionally broken counterpart to the broken foot in the picture, with both pathetically and tragically confined to a corner due to the perversity of male artists. Poussin and Frenhofer have opted for chastity and/or impotence, sublimating sexual energy into art. Balzac reputedly believed he lost a novel every time he reached orgasm.[40]

When Balzac compares the beautiful foot to a torso of Venus emerging from the rubble of a burnt-down town, he reminds his readers that artists often studied the human body piecemeal, using casts taken from life and antique sculpture, and from prints and drawings. The torso of Venus in the burnt town equally evokes Pompeii. Frenhofer is a volcanic artist, who has covered his own picture in lava, burying it to conceal it, except for one tantalising corner. The preserved fragment recalls one of the most famous discoveries at Pompeii and demands equal veneration. Visitors were enthralled by a lump of earth found beneath the House of Diomedes and displayed in the museum at Portici. The travel writer François-René de Chateaubriand had grown rhapsodic about it in his memoir Voyage en Italie: 'c'est là que fut étouffée la jeune femme dont le sein s'est imprimé dans le morceau de terre que j'ai vu à Portici: la mort, comme un statuaire, a moulé sa victime'.[41] [It is there that the young woman was smothered whose breast is imprinted in the piece of earth that I saw at Portici: death, like a sculptor, has moulded his victim.]

Frenhofer is a painter equivalent to Chateaubriand's death-dealing sculptor. Whereas the 'sculptor' sculpts the torso, embodying the heart of the human body, Frenhofer paints the foot, a marginal corner. For Gillette, the dark and dusty studio corner is a tomb where an abandoned woman goes to die: 'kill me', she says to Poussin when he finally notices her, her death fitting punishment for having loved someone she now despises. That same night Frenhofer, realising there is nothing on his canvas except for that one small corner, kills himself

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[39] Balzac, Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu, 438.

[40] James Hall, The Self-Portrait: a Cultural History (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014), 216–29.

[41] François-René de Chateaubriand, Voyage en Italie (Grenoble: J. Rey, 1921), 118: 11 January 1804.

after burning all his pictures. The world's first corner artist, along with his life's work, becomes dust and ashes like Pompeii, the memory of it preserved only in Balzac's novella.

## Corners of creation

In the 1860s, Émile Zola defined the work of art as 'un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament' [a corner of creation seen through a temperament].[42] He was partly thinking of Manet, whose Déjeuner sur l'Herbe, with its scandalous secluded picnic party was 'ce coin de la nature rendu avec un simplicité si juste' [this corner of nature rendered with perfect simplicity]. In contrast to academic history painters, composing vast staged tableaux with classical themes, Manet 'place tranquillement dans un coin de son atelier quelques objets et quelques personnes, et se met à peindre, en analysant le tout avec soin'. [is happy to place a few objects and people in a corner of his studio and paint them with care]. With Olympia, Manet's supercilious reclining sex worker, he placed 'dans un coin une négresse et un chat' [in a corner a negress and a cat].[43] In Manet's Portrait of Zola (1868), the author was duly 'cornered' by his chair back and a Japanese screen. The corner cult had helped facilitate appreciation of Japanese prints, with their improvised perspectives.

Van Gogh was one of many artists fascinated by Zola's apotheosis of the 'coin de creation', as we saw in the examples discussed earlier.[44] Edgar Degas's dancer pictures are some his many works to activate the corner/edge. His most sado-erotic use of corners is Portrait of Henri Michel-Lévy (c.1878), where a 'cornered' artist is flanked by an abject clothed female mannequin, suggestive of a troubled relationship with women. The latter is the model for the supine 'loose' woman in the painted 'corner of nature' to his right (Figure 4.11). Works entitled 'coin de …' had come into vogue around this time, implying bohemian alienation, geographical exoticism, or bourgeois solitude and intimacy. When Degas exhibited this claustrophobic studio corner at the 1879 Impressionist exhibition, there were three pictures entitled 'coin de', including Louis Forain's study in romantic flirtation Coin de Salon.[45]

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[42] Émile Zola, Mes haines; causeries littéraires et artistiques (Paris: A. Faure, 1866), 25; idem., Le Roman Experimentale (1880) (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1902), 237.

[43] Zola, Mes haines, 356, 347, 359.

[44] Van Gogh, The Letters, nos. 361, 492, 643.

[45] Catalogue de la 4e Exposition de peinture, par M. Bracquemond… (Paris: Morris Père, 1789), nos. 44, 98 (Forain), 207.


**Figure 4.11.** Edgar Degas, *Portrait of an Artist in his Studio*, ca. 1878, oil on canvas, 41.5 x 27.3 cm. Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon.

Zola was inspired by the positivism of historian and philosopher Hippolyte Taine (1828–93), a close friend.[46] Taine criticised German idealist philosophers for having 'torturé leurs formules universelles pour en tirer des cas tout particuliers' [tortured their universal formulae to make special cases conform to them].[47] Idealists ignored the element of chance, because to admit it would bring their grand philosophical edifices down in ruins. Taine did not mean that everything in our own little 'canton' was merely of local significance. Rather, it was a microcosm: 'Ce coin où nous sommes relégués nous en fournit la matière, et la chute d'une pomme suffit à Newton pour deviner cette loi de la pesanteur qui fait rouler les astres au delà de la portée de nos instruments et de nos conjectures …'. [This corner where we are relegated furnishes us with matter, and the fall of

[46] Thomas H. Goetz, Taine and the Fine Arts. (Madrid: Playor 1973).

[47] Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, Le positivisme anglais: Étude sur Stuart Mill (Paris: Germer-Baillière, 1864; reprint Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990), 143.

an apple sufficed to Newton to divine this law of gravity which makes the stars revolve, beyond the scope of our instruments and conjectures …'].[48] As part of his mission to define specific 'corners', Taine stressed the importance of race, milieu and history in the development of the arts and sciences.

In order to give a role to imagination in literature and the arts, Zola would add a 'coin plein de fantasie et de caprice' [corner full of fantasy and caprice].[49] This corner was often erotic, but too brutally and socially transgressive to be considered a rococo revival. In Nana (1880), a vast aristocratic town house, now melancholy and austere as a convent, contains only a single piece of modern furniture in which the rebellious young hostess sits waiting for her evening salon to start.

> La comptesse Sabine se tenait sur une chaise profonde, dont la soie rouge capitonnée avait une mollesse d'édredon. C'était le seul meuble moderne, un coin de fantaisie introduit dans cette sévérité, et qui jurait. – Alors, disait la jeune femme, nous aurons le shah de Perse …[50]
>
> [The countess Sabine sat on a deep chair, whose padded red silk had the softness of eiderdown. It was the only modern furniture, a corner of fantasy introduced into this severity, and which it blasphemed. 'Well then', said the young woman, 'this evening we will have the Shah of Persia …'].

Figure 4.12 is a comparable chair, the padded upholstery as good as new because it is part of a set of miniature pieces made to demonstrate British furniture maker Albert Bentley's skill. Sabine's chair underpins her desire for a sensuous, passionate life. It transports her, like a magic carpet, into an erotic fantasy where she entertains the Shah of Persia in her Parisian harem. The French word coin means wedge as well as corner. The countess's armchair-cum-bed is a red wedge that breaks asunder her own family's social norms, while embracing and cornering her from behind like a lover. For Zola, the coin sends tremors through respectable bourgeois society. It is the place where animal passions are born – and die.

This is nowhere more apparent than in Thérèse Raquin (1868), a grim petit bourgeois Macbeth that scandalised Zola's contemporaries, who nonetheless read the novel compulsively. Corners are central to the nightmarish wedding night of the orphan Thérèse, whose mother was Algerian, and Laurent, of peasant stock. The word coin is repeated during the wedding night chapter like the tolling of a bell. Thérèse had been married by her guardian aunt to her sickly son Camille. She has never loved him and is bored to death. When Camille's strapping childhood

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[48] Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, Essai sur Tite Live (Paris, L. Hachette, 2nd. ed, 1860), 119.
[49] Zola, Mes haines,158.
[50] Zola, Nana (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880), 68.

**Figure 4.12.** Albert Bentley, *Miniature Armchair*, 1860–80. 32.5 x 20 cm. Frames: softwood and mahogany. Feet: brass. Upholstery: glazed linen and wadding under upholstery, with silk damask and trimmings. London, Victoria and Albert Museum. Given by Miss F. Bentley

friend and novice artist Laurent turns up to paint Camille's portrait, they start a torrid affair fired by savage animal passion – and by Thérèse's African blood. They brutally murder Camille on a boating expedition, Laurent assaulting then drowning him. No one suspects a thing, despite Camille having bitten Laurent on the neck, making a wound that never fully heals. The death is recorded as accidental, but the killers are haunted by their crime, and by the dead man, whose ghost is ever-present, even in bed; the neck-bite remains, the pain intensifying at salient moments. The lovers can no longer abide each other. A year after Camille's murder, however, they marry, and return to the Raquin family home for their wedding night, hoping for a new start, free from guilt, fear and loathing. The master bedroom has been beautifully prepared: 'On eût dit un désert heureux, un coin ignoré, chaud et sentant bon, fermé à tous les cris du dehors, un de ces coins faits et apprêtés pour les sensualités et les besoins de mystère de la passion'. [It was like a happy oasis, a forgotten corner, warm and sweet-smelling, shut off from all extraneous noise, one of those corners designed for sensuality and to satisfy the needs of the mystery of passionate love].[51]

[51] Zola, Thérèse Raquin (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1868), 254; English translation by Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2004), 112.

It should be an earthly paradise, a hortus conclusus, one that ultimately recalls both Eden and Horace's country villa near Tarentum in Puglia:

> Ille terrarum mihi praeter omnis
> angulus ridet, ubi non Hymetto
> mella decedunt viridique certat
> baca Venafro, … [Odes, 2.6. 13–16][52]
>
> [This corner of the world smiles at me more than any other, where the honey is superior to that from Mount Hymettus, and its green olives vie with those from Venafrum …]

Yet they can feel nothing but disgust and horror at each other, realising that their passion died the moment they killed Camille. Camille is far more alive dead, than he ever was alive:

> Tout à coup Laurent crut avoir une hallucination. Comme il se tournait, re- venant de la fenêtre au lit, il vit Camille dans un coin plein d'ombre, entre la cheminée et l'armoire à glace. La face de sa victime était verdâtre et convulsionnée, telle qu'il l'avait aperçue sur une dalle de la Morgue. Il demeura cloué sur le tapis, défaillant, s'appuyant contre un meuble.
>
> [Suddenly, Laurent thought he experienced a hallucination. As he was turning to go from the window back to the bed, he saw Camille in a corner plunged in shadow between the fireplace and the wardrobe. His victim's face was greenish in colour and convulsed, as it had been on the slab in the Morgue. He stayed, rooted to the spot, faint and supporting himself on a piece of furniture.][53]

Terrified, he points to the 'coin plein d'ombre' [shadow-filled corner] where he can still see Camille's face. Thérèse realises it is the portrait of Camille that Laurent had painted, which should have been removed (Figure 4.13). Laurent now realises what a dreadful but prophetic daub it is, showing the grimacing face of a corpse with 'two white eyes swimming in their soft, yellowish sockets' against a dark background. He is too afraid to take it down, but feels Camille is watching him and becomes terrified of any dark corner. 'C'est ainsi que Laurent s'était mis à trembler devant un coin d'ombre, comme un enfant poltron. L'être frissonnant et hagard, le nouvel individu qui venait de se dégager en lui du paysan épais et abruti, éprouvait les peurs, lès anxiétés des tempéraments nerveux'. [That is why Laurent came to shudder at the sight of a dark corner, like a timorous child. This new person, the shivering, haggard being that had just emerged in him

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[52] Victoria Rimell, The Closure of Space in Roman Poetics: Empire's Inward Turn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 87–8; Jutte, 'Toward a History of the Corner', 345–6.

[53] Zola, Thérèse Raquin, 181; trans. Robin Buss, 119.


**Figure 4.13.** Horace Castelli, *Là, là, disait Laurent d'une voix terrifiée*, illustration to Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin; suivi du Capitaine Burle* (Paris: Marpon and Flammarion, 1883), 233. Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF Non-Commercial

out of the thick, brutish peasant, experienced the fears and anxieties of those of nervous temperament.][54]

Laurent's fear of dark corners resembles affective monomania, a psychological disorder defined earlier in the century by medical reformer Étienne-Jean Georget (1772–1840). It was an abrupt 'lesion of the will' resulting in partial insanity, which could lead to murder and other crimes, such as kleptomania.[55] Here Laurent's scar, hurting more than usual because the collar on his wedding shirt digs into it, is a permanent 'lesion of the will'. The dark corner is an architectural lesion, a festering, malignant growth on the body of the room. It is also, of course, the mouth of hell, the lurid portrait a devil staring at new arrivals. In this bedroom, Paradise and Hell are conjoined, the two sides – light and dark – of their marital

[54] Zola, Thérèse Raquin, 189; trans. Robin Buss, 124.

[55] Marina Van Zuylen, Monomania: The Flight from Everyday Life in Literature and Art (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005).

coin (coin also means money in French). The newlyweds cannot now enjoy the sensual pleasures of love and will never have children. But there has been a new birth. Laurent is instantly reborn as a scared child, a 'shivering, haggard being', an orphan who will never find a cosy corner of his own.

## Hot and cold corners

Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916) is one of the major turn-of-the-century exponents of the corner cult. Corners are key protagonists in many of his sparsely furnished, hazily depicted, greyly monochrome interiors (Figure 4.14). They are sites of solitude and disconnection, where love and emotion appear to have gone cold, or been bottled up. The rooms are mostly based on the apartments he and his wife Ida Ilsted occupied in Copenhagen from their marriage in 1891 until Vilhelm's death. His home was his studio, a stage set with moveable props. Women, shown singly, usually from the back dressed in black, are the only human models, with Ida by far the most frequent. The back of the neck, ivoried by light, is the only beacon.[56]

Around sixty of these interiors were painted in the first-floor apartment at Standgade 30, a seventeenth-century merchant house where they lived from 1898 to 1909. In an interview of 1909 for the interiors magazine Hjemmet [Home], Hammershøi said: 'Rent personlig holder jeg af det Gamle, af gamle Boliger, gamle Møbler, af den ganske saeregne Stemning, som hviler over alt'. [From a personal point of view, I am fond of the old, of old homes, old furniture, of the quite distinctive atmosphere which reposes in all of this].[57] The old furniture he admired was eighteenth and early nineteenth-century – the plain 'Georgian' furniture that the English Arts and Crafts movement so revered, and that was copied and emulated by modern manufacturers. In the Hjemmet interview, he praised the craftsmen of a century ago for working with far more artistic understanding and love than now, when factory work dominates. The Hammershøis' apartment, with its simple geometric mouldings and panelling from the eighteenth century, is nonetheless reimagined. Endowed with a chaste, quasi-monastic austerity and simplicity, it is even more radically pared down than the biedermeier interiors of the earlier nineteenth century. There is no trace of what Edmond de Goncourt in the preface to La Maison d'un Artiste (Paris 1880) praised as bricabracomania,

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[56] Poul Vad, Hammershøi (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1988), 178ff.; English translation with same pagination: Vilhelm Hammershøi and Danish Art at the Turn of the Century, trans. Kenneth Tindall (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[57] Vad, Hammershøi, 402.

**Figure 4.14.** Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior*, 1899, oil on canvas, 64.5 × 58.1 cm. Tate Gallery, Presented in memory of Leonard Borwick by his friends through the Art Fund 1926.

or of the textile saturated interiors of the French intimiste painters Vuillard and Bonnard, and of Orientalist interior design.[58]

Hammershøi eschewed and purged home comforts like patterned and coloured wallpaper and textiles, books, newspapers, drapes, carpets, rugs and coal buckets and (we see some of these in photographs of Vilhelm and Ida in situ). Virtually the only decoration appears on single ceramics, as isolated as the human props and more sparingly used than in Whistler's japonisme. Even door handles may be eradicated or dissolved down to tiny functionless knobs. Doors, located in the corners of rooms, are leading protagonists, doubling up as moveable folding screens.

There is never enough furniture or furnishing to make the house a conventional home. It is the closing stages of a chess match, with few pieces on the board. The absurd end game is often enacted in a corner, with Ida as Queen, the stove as King. The corner is a magnet for furniture, stoves, stove screens, gazes,

[58] James Hall, The Artist's Studio: A Cultural History (London: Thames and Hudson, 2022), 199–225.

bodies and shadows. Corners can be concealed, compressed and created by an open door, the shadowy space behind intensified and rendered mysterious. Our hyper-consciousness of the corner/edge of picture and room creates a lopsided asymmetry. In the corner, objects, feelings, thoughts, printed and written words are stockpiled and safeguarded, creating a desert island refuge or prison, with Ida as solitary female Crusoe. There may have been a political dimension to this carving up and emptying of space, and human occupation of a small segment. During the nineteenth century, Denmark had radically shrunk in size, losing Norway in 1814 during the Napoleonic Wars, and losing Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg in 1864 to Prussia.[59] At any rate, 'Ida' is at once stranded and self-sufficient.

Hammershøi's creation, activation, and mystification of corners, together with the pervasive austerity, is one of key things that separates his work from Dutch Golden Age artists like Vermeer, with whom his work has always been compared.[60] The Dutch square-on box interior is uniformly hospitable, habitable and comfortable; in Hammershøi, the semantic excess of the corner severs and alienates it from the rest of the room, hinting at rupture and trauma.

Ida is usually seen from behind in virtual silhouette wearing black, but so abstracted as to be objectified and ghostly. She is often placed in a corner or gazing into one, immovable with a mannikin's stiffness and impersonality, or with a punished child's petrified numbness.[61] She is no more animated or important (just another heat source?) than the black cast-iron stoves that dominate several corners like rusty suits of armour in a Gothic revival interior, as in his first picture of an empty room, The White Door (Interior with Old Stove) (1888).[62] In Interior (1899), a matt black woman stares enigmatically into a corner at a matt black stove and projecting pipe. The stove is barricaded or besieged by a chair and a circular mahogany table, which would seem to block the doors. Here the man-sized stove is both ominous memento mori and phallic fetish. Depictions of stoves in artists' studios became common in the second half of the nineteenth century, dark symbols of the impoverished bohemian's constant battle against cold in the face of an indifferent public.[63] The stove here shows no sign of burning, and the woman is wearing summer clothes, rendering the scene still more mysterious.

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59 Jean-Loup Champion et al., Hammershøi: Painter of Northern Light (New York: Rizzoli-Electa, 2023), 21.

60 Vad, Hammershøi, 407–8; Naoki Sato, 'The Quotidian View Without Narrative', in Felix Krämer et al., Hammershøi (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008), 38–45.

61 Champion, Hammershøi: Painter of Northern Light, 129.

62 Vad, Hammershøi, 73.

63 Hall, Artist's Studio, 8–9.

Even if pensively self-contained ('Ida' sometimes reads or writes or sews) it is hard not to see the 'woman-in-the-corner' as symbolic of the confinement and Gillette-style marginalisation of women by men in general and by artists in particular. In Sunshine in the Drawing Room (1910; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa), a woman reads in the far corner of a cavernous room dominated by a male portrait that hangs above a monumental Empire-style sofa. It feels as though the man in the portrait is a dead and/or absent patriarch, and that the empty sofa will never be a 'coin de fantaisie'. Hammershøi cultivates enigma rather than clear messages, and without taking sides, deftly dramatises the cultural gulf that existed between modern man and woman. This gulf was critiqued by Henrik Ibsen with a view to female emancipation and equality, and by the Goncourt brothers in despair that modern hommesses were nothing like the Madame de Pompadours of the Ancien Régime – the brothers' own 'lust' for collecting rococo art was only the index of how modern woman had failed to possess the male imagination.[64]

One thinks especially of Charlotte Brontë's doomed young teenage bride in Shirley (1849). Mary Cave has rejected many ardent suitors in favour of a tepid vicar who didn't like women. She was 'stillness personified', and dies after two years of marriage, seemingly of neglect. Her Cave surname seems to have doomed her to hermit-like isolation. Her indifferent husband believed that

> so long as a woman was silent, nothing ailed her, and she wanted nothing. If she did not complain of solitude, solitude, however continued, could not be irksome to her. If she did not talk and put herself forward, express a partiality for this, an aversion to that, she had no partialities nor aversions, and it was useless to consult her tastes.[65]

## Purging the (female) corner

The modernist architect Le Corbusier provides a suitable coda to a story that continues vigorously into the present day, with works such as Anish Kapoor's much vandalised erotic sculpture Dirty Corner (2011–15), installed in the formal gardens of Versailles. The centrality of the corner to the nineteenth-century imagination was made clear by Le Corbusier's puritanical 'Law of Ripolin' (1925), which is in large part a patriarchal crusade against corners. Addressed to male property owners, it remains in force today with the fashion for open-plan minimalist

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[64] Debra Silverman, Art Nouveau in Fin de Siècle France (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 36.

[65] Charlotte Brontë, Shirley, ed. Jessica Cox (London: Penguin, 2006), 50–51, ch. 4.

interiors. Having called on the police to enforce a decree for 'all rooms in Paris to be given a coat of whitewash', Le Corbusier elaborates:

> His home is made clean. There are no more dirty, dark corners. Everything is shown as it is. Then comes inner cleanness, for the course adopted leads to refusal to allow anything at all which is not correct, authorised, intended, desired, thought-out … When you are surrounded with shadows and dark corners you are at home only as far as the hazy edges of the darkness your eyes cannot penetrate. You are not master in your own house. Once you have put ripolin on your walls you will be master of yourself.[66]

Le Corbusier's fanatical suppression of the corner acknowledges that it had indeed become a special place – an unruly realm of love, fantasy, desire, dirt and death.[67]

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[66] Le Corbusier, L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui (Paris: G. Crès, 1925), 188; Le Corbusier, The Decorative Art of Today, trans. J. Dunnett (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1987), 192.

[67] Japanese novelist Junichirō Tanizaki's In Praise of Shadows (1933–4) rowed against the tide of Western Modernism, celebrating the beauty of shadowy alcoves, nooks and corners in Japanese homes before the arrival of electric light and pale wall and ceiling colours: 'we are overcome with the feeling that in this small corner of the atmosphere there reigns complete and utter silence; that here in the darkness immutable tranquillity holds sway. The "mysterious Orient" of which Westerners speak probably refers to the uncanny silence of these dark places. … A phosphorescent jewel gives off its glow and colour in the dark and loses its beauty in the light of day. Were it not for shadows there would be no beauty. Our ancestors made of woman an object inseparable from darkness, like lacquerware decorated in gold or mother-of-pearl …'. In Praise of Shadows, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), 32–3, 46.

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