RENOIR: SELF REPRESENTATIONS, REAL AND WISHED FOR

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The thesis of this paper is that Pierre Auguste Renoir in the last 20 odd years of his life painted extraordinarily heavy young women in reaction to his suffering as a horribly thin arthritic person. The fat healthy looking females contrasted with his eventually weakened emaciated state. Renoir, I suggest, using denial as a defense, identified with these obese subjects. [Slides 1,2,3,3A,3B]

In developing this thesis I plan to demonstrate Renoir's passivity, his tendency to identify with women and his employment of denial throughout his life. These traits facilitated his identifying with the heavy women. In the course of doing this I will show slides of Renoir's six self portrait paintings (but not the drawing he did of himself), 3 before and 3 after he became ill. This will enable us to compare his self representations at different times in his life.

Renoir was a complicated person composed of contradictory characteristics. Don't be surprised when we see activity along with passivity and masculinity along with female identity. I shall describe his multifaceted personality while emphasizing traits that led to his painting the large women in his last years.

Throughout Renoir's creative life he painted voluptuous women. However in his last years many (but not all) of the women in his paintings were so heavy that

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even admirers of his work denounced them. [See also Bather at Fountain, 1910; Nudes Wearing Hats, 1919; Roses and Study of Gabrielle 1907] Mary Cassatt objected to the "awful pictures of enormously fat red women with small heads" (Stevenson, 1991, p.173). Canaday (1959) called "the heavy rolling glowing masses and large abdomens" of his paintings "grotesque" (p.220-221) Others called these huge figures "pneumatic goddesses" or "windbags [who] would be burst if pricked by a pin" or "rubber lobsters afflicted with elephantiasis" (Neret, 2001, p.411)

AN OUTLINE OF RENOIR'S LIFE

Renoir was born in Limoges, France on February 24, 1841, the sixth of seven children. All but one of his siblings were boys; the girl, Lisa, became a feminist who fought for worker's rights. Two brothers died in infancy.

Renoir's parents were conscientious, serious, quiet and frugal. His father Leonard, was a successful tailor who could move his business from his home to nearby quarters. He worked with his hands as his son later did. Renoir's mother, Marguerite (nee Merlett), was a seamstress who was a "no-nonsense person" (Hanson, 1968) p. 3). She spoke frankly and presented a plain appearance; she objected to frills in clothing and make-up. Renoir retained these traits as he advocated simplicity in life and art throughout his life.

When Renoir was three the family moved to Paris near to the Louvre which Renoir frequented as a child and later. Renoir told his son Jean, who recorded his father's recollections in a valuable book, "Renoir, My Father" (1958, 1952), that he

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recalled nothing of his days in Limoges. However it is known that the future painter
drew a great deal even when he was quite young.

Renoir's parents, practical and aware of his talents, encouraged his artistic
interests. At thirteen he helped support the family as a painter of porcelain. The face
the young Renoir produced repeatedly on the plates he designed was extraordinarily
similar to the face he often painted in his mature work, and quite like that of his
wife-to-be whom he did not yet know.

At eighteen, when the porcelain company closed shop Renoir turned to
painting window blinds and night club interiors. He enrolled in a traditional art
school whose director, Charles Gleyre, advocated a classical approach derived from
studies of the old masters. While there Renoir became close friends with his fellow
students, Monet, Sisley and Bazille, who along with Manet developed
Impressionism. They painted together out of doors and rebelled against the theories
of the classicists.

Departing from Impressionism around 1883, Renoir increasingly turned to
more classical modes of painting. He became renowned for his portraits which
afforded him a better income and enabled him to travel, marry and raise a family.
His last twenty years were clouded by his illnesses, but he never halted his creative
work. Renoir died December 3, 1919.

RENOIR'S CHARACTERISTICS (INCLUDING A DISCUSSION OF HIS SELF
PORTRAITS BEFORE HIS ILLNESS)
Renoir's personal characteristics, even prior to his illnesses, facilitated his ability to identify with and thus use the women he painted to attempt to deny his devastating state.

Denial was a prime defense in Renoir's life and art. I use the term "denial" to signify "a defense mechanism by which the individual unconsciously repudiates some or all of the meanings of an event. The ego thus avoids some painful aspect of reality and so diminishes anxiety or other unpleasurable affects....To help efface a perception of reality a fantasy is often created that erases the disagreeable and unwelcome facts of the situation" (Moore and Fine, 1900, p.50). Denial then is a defense in which perception and interpretation of external reality are distorted or diminished. Throughout his career Renoir was interested in beauty, pleasure and joy in life. He said that he wanted to avoid ugliness, of which there was too much in life. After he became crippled, his use of denial increased. Not that the denial was complete. Obviously Renoir was a keen observer, who could put on canvas the subtleties he perceived, more so than most people, and more so than most artists. Even in his last years his vision was extraordinarily accurate and his motor skills remarkable for a man whose hands were weak and to a great extent paralyzed. He considered the very heavy, women he painted in his last years beautiful although some have declared them ugly.

The ability to employ identification as a defense or as an adaptive mechanism is characteristic of other artists as well as Renoir. Rose (1971) has observed that creativity and aesthetic experiences involve "narcissistic fusion states." The artist, Rose said, experiences periods in which he feels fused to objects as an infant feels
fused to his mother, a primary identification, alternating with periods of separation. Certainly Renoir tended to fuse with his paintings; basing his statements on conversations with his father late in the painter's life, his son, Jean Renoir (1958) wrote that he became one with the flowers he created. "He identified with these flowers, and forgot his pain" (p. 458). He entered the landscapes and touched the scenery or the women of his work. Such feelings of fusion, which have an erotic loving element as well as a preoedipal origin, facilitates identification as well as projection, both of which involve the blurring of boundaries between self and object representations.

There is evidence of the painter's feminine identification in an 1876 self-portrait of Renoir's. Admittedly, such a conclusion based on visual impressions rests on one's judgement and is subject to controversy.

In an 1876 "self portrait at thirty-five" [Slide 4], exhibited at the Fogg Art Museum, Renoir stands at his easel, brush in hand, painting or getting ready to paint. Renoir's expression is calm, his skin is smooth and his eyes are soft and dreamy, while at the same time observant. Bailey (1997) states that in the 1876 painting "Renoir has idealized his somewhat gaunt features...his face is softer and his form more ample" (p. 148). His abdomen appears to be rounded and slightly protruding. Although Riviere (quoted by Bailey (1997)) wrote that Renoir struck him as "reserved and timid, recoiling from anything that would draw attention to himself, Bailey added that "shyness could be overcome by immersion in work from which Renoir was known to experience an epiphany of sorts" (p.148).
The 1875 self portrait [Slide 5] at the Clark Collection (dated about 1870 at the Clark museum) reveals a different aspect of Renoir's personality. This painting, in the Impressionist style, was relatively rapidly done; it omitted details but revealed intense emotion. "Although Renoir called his self-portrait a 'paltry sketch' he included it in the 1876 Impressionist exhibition. The swift, bold brushstrokes capture the artist's expression with great economy and give the painting considerable fervor" (Notes on IMPRESSION Exhibit at Clark Collection, 2001). Rough skinned, tense and threatening, even "ferocious," he is a "spare man, sharp-eyed and nervous, who seems incapable of ever standing still" (Vollard, quoted by Bailey, 1997, p. 148). Each of these portraits reveals a thoughtful, perceptive, serious man displaying varying degrees and types of tension.

A third self portrait (1879, owned by the Musee D'Orsay) [Slide 6] is an informal unfinished, unsigned painting, a sketch, possibly in preparation for another painting or paintings, or a sophisticated doodle. The face of a woman appears in the lower left hand corner. The male and female faces are close to each other, perhaps suggesting the type of fusion of self and object representations mentioned above.

Renoir's passivity, another significant characteristic, revealed itself in a life-long fantasy that he was "like a cork thrown into a stream and carried along on the current" (Fox, 1950, p. 112; Renoir, 1958). He felt that fate rather than his personal desires determined his destiny. The importance of this fantasy cannot be overemphasized. Renoir repeatedly talked about it to his son Jean, so much so that
the index of his son's informal biography contains fifteen references to it (Renoir, 1958). The fantasy influenced him at many crucial times throughout his life.

It came to the fore when he was considering becoming an artist, and when he required support for his continuing artistic identity. When Renoir at 18 lost his job as a painter of porcelain, he later told Jean, he had to decide what to do. "I can always make a living. But I have an aversion to making decisions. The 'cork' you remember" (Renoir, 1958, p. 73).

Later, he said: "If I have painted in light tones it is because it is necessary to paint that way. It wasn't the result of a theory, it was a need that was in the air, in everybody's mind, unconsciously, not just in mine alone" (p. 77). Carried by the current, he said that when he painted he just let himself go, implying the kind of automatic creativity for which the artist feels he is not responsible. When his son skeptically observed that Renoir "was credited with changing the whole course of modern art" in the development of Impressionism, his father "gazed at [him] with an ironic smile" (p. 76). This type of passivity, attributing one's creative activity to external forces, can serve an important purpose. It is a common unconscious maneuver of creative people who can thus avoid the unconscious guilt that creativity often entails, a guilt symbolized in the myth of Prometheus who was punished for stealing fire from the gods.

Throughout his life Renoir painted because he loved painting, and he often declared that he had no set theory that he pursued; he hated and avoided theoretical and intellectual arguments about approaches to art, though at times he engaged in them. When relatively early in his career Renoir painted with and next to his friend
Monet, he was very much influenced by Monet's approach. Under Monet's influence the two developed Impressionism. As an Impressionist he was interested in landscapes, and the effects of the air and light on the objects depicted, the use of primary colors and the avoidance of black and brown in the creation of shadows in his paintings. Indeed he contributed much to this mode of painting while adhering to his interest in people, a lesser concern of Monet by far. His paintings of people, following Edouard Manet, concentrated on common every day persons rather than mythic or regal figures.

Passivity of course is not synonymous with femininity, but a tendency to inactivity (one meaning of the term "passivity") or a need to be the object of loving or aggressive attention (another definition of "passive") (Moore and Fine, 1990) may both facilitate or be one component of a female identity.

Renoir's passive approach was countered by a stubborn determination to have his way. Despite his "cork" fantasy, Renoir did not allow people to dominate him. He exhibited with the Impressionists several times, but by 1883 (age 42) he largely rejected Impressionism. He disliked being considered part of any movement. His love for painting per se did not interfere with his desire to make money which he succeeded at doing after years of financial failure. By 1881 he had accumulated sufficient money so that he could travel and study the masters outside of France. There followed a period during which his work was not primarily based on nature, as were the Impressionists' work, but more on observation of established classical art.
Renoir's feelings toward women were contradictory. On the one hand, his early experience was with his powerful assertive older sister Lisa, and he married a strong woman who, like Lisa, was not only a manager and protector, but was capable of saving those she loved. On the other hand, Renoir as an adult looked down upon women who he felt were inferior and not as smart as men, the usual belief in those pre-feminist days. The painter was friendly to and enjoyed chatting with his models as he worked. Renoir, as a young man and even later, was goodhearted and considerate. Although he felt superior to women and in need of male companionship, he was extraordinarily kind to women and interested in children in a maternal way. As a young man he gave money or food to poor unmarried young mothers, and even organized an affair to raise money for their benefit. Sometimes he got into trouble because of his warm protective feelings for children. Once he was mistaken for a kidnapper when he rocked a carriage containing a crying baby who was being neglected by its flirting caretaker. A threatening crowd chased him, forcing him to run to escape.

RENOIR'S ILLNESSES

Let us now turn to Renoir's illnesses which affected his self representation as an ailing old man and in turn his wished for self representation as a young strong powerful person.

I believe that a dominant determinant of Renoir's painting increasingly large buxom women [Slides 1,2,3,3A.3B] in the last twenty odd years of his life was his suffering from a serious illness (or a number of illnesses). The most chronically dangerous illness was a progressive rheumatism, probably rheumatoid arthritis
As early as 1894 (age 53) "Renoir suspected his future," says Hanson. After at least one arthritic attack, he wrote to Julie Manet (the daughter of Manet's brother and Berthe Morisot, both of whom died, leaving the Renoirs as her "guardians"): 'I'm caught; it's going to get me slowly but surely'" (p. 265). Much later (1012) he did quite likely have a stroke or strokes which left him partially paralyzed.

In 1897 (age 56) the arthritis became much worse. That year after he fractured his right arm when he fell off his bicycle, Renoir's pains returned. It became clear that a progressive rheumatism marked by periods of acute exacerbation would continue to plague him. His arthritis caused severe pain, swelling and immobility. After a period he needed a cane to walk. Later he required crutches and a wheelchair. Eventually he had to be carried. He became extraordinarily thin so that it became painful to sit because his bones, unprotected by the normal padding of fat, pressed against his chair. Even lying in bed had become difficult as he developed pressure sores. Nevertheless he continued to paint, a feat that required tying his brush to his arm or hand which was involuntarily clenched.

In the autumn of 1898 (age 57) Renoir had "the worst attack he had yet suffered since the facial paralysis [probably Bell's Palsy] of ten years earlier; he was unable to move his right arm and was in such pain that he could not paint. From that moment everyone knew that it was a fight against time. As always he had one

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3 Canaday (1969) states: "As early as 1881, Renoir began to be bothered by a form of arthritis that by 1900 had twisted and crippled his hands" (p. 913). He does not present evidence for the time he proposes.
thought, his work. He wanted to go on painting until he died. He was determined to continue" (Hanson, 1968, p. 266). Against all odds, he painted until he died.

As Renoir grew older and thinner his angular appearance and the accompanied pain plagued him and made him wish he were heavier. In a letter of September 4, 1904 to Durand-Ruel (the art dealer) which Adriani (1999) quotes, Renoir wrote: "What bothers me most...is that I can't sit for long because of my thinness: 97 pounds...My bones press through the skin, and after a while I can't stand or sit any longer. But I still have a good appetite. Let us hope it will help me put on some weight" (pp. 52-53). In contrast to his own body, Renoir delighted in the bodies of his models. Adriani (1999) says that "Even as an old man, his own body reduced to almost skeletal proportions, Renoir continued to derive great joy from the rich supple curves of his models whom [and here he quotes Renoir himself] 'the gods have spared those horrid sharp angles'" (p. 298).

Despite these serious disabilities which threatened his life and led him to think of death, he was often remarkably cheerful. That his cheerfulness hid marked feelings of dejection is attested to by two paintings done in 1910 (age 69) in which he depicts himself as staring, sad and vacant.

In 1912 (age 71) Renoir suffered a stroke which at least temporarily paralyzed his arms and made him unable to walk, so that he had to be carried.

In 1916, when Renoir was 75, he complained bitterly of his pain and his age. Quoting Riviere, Hanson wrote: "'I've never felt so old' he would say and he sometimes even spoke of being too old to go on painting." (p.291). He was in the

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4 Julie Manet, the daughter of Edouard Manet’s brother Eugene (who died when she was 14) and Berthe Morisot, was "practically adopted" by the Renoirs after her mother’s death in 1895 when
depth of despair. The death of his wife Aline in 1917 (Renoir was 76) added to his grief. She had been a caring and nurturing woman who supported his painting emotionally, organized his home and life, and tolerated his absences when he left home on painting excursions without her before he became too disabled to do so.

RENOIR’S SELF-PORTRAITS AFTER HE BECAME ILL

Renoir did three self portraits, which I have already discussed, before his illness. He created another three paintings of himself (Clark Institute, 1899[^5]; [Slide 8]; Private Collection, 1910 [Slide 9]; Private Collection, 1910, [Slide 10] and one drawing (1914, location unknown) (No slide shown) of himself after his illness struck.

All three of the later paintings and the drawing were realistic in that they reveal an old gray man. Rosenblum, Stevens and Dumas (2000) state that in his 1899 self portrait "Renoir ...shows his face lined with the vulnerability and pain he suffered during the onset of the rheumatic illness that would eventually cripple him" (p. 322). I would add that a sadness suffuses the artist's face, and that a somewhat fixed stare may have had a neurological source as well.

Bailey (1997), quoting the diary of Julie Manet, who saw him paint the portrait, states that Renoir modified the painting at the insistence of Julie and other young friends. It was originally "rather harsh and wrinkled" (p. 56), but became less so. (The young people encouraged Renoir to disavow his appearance, one might say.)

[^5]: Although this self portrait is often dated 1897, Renoir completed it in 1899 (Bailey, 1997).
A frontal 1910 self portrait is remarkably similar to his 1899 painting; he is sad and aged, but more lively, alert and healthy looking than in a second 1910 painting, a profile of Renoir, which reveals a thin pale man with sad eyes, dreamy and withdrawn, more clearly than the other two. The sharply piercing eyes of his premorbid self portraits are no longer there. Although his son Jean describes the eyes as those of a smiling man (a result of a family disposition to denial perhaps), most observers would identify the depressive affect, not surprising in a sick man struggling to cope with a horrible illness that threatened his sublimation and livelihood. A photograph at this time confirms this conception of Renoir.

RENOIR'S PAINTINGS OF NUDES BEFORE AND AFTER HIS ILLNESSES

The nature of Renoir's nudes changed with different periods of his artistic life. All his women were plump and luscious. (1) His early pre-Impressionist paintings including those he did of Lise reveal her as a dark haired classic figure, sometimes as a mythic figure (Diana, 1867) [Slide 11], once posed with a dog (Bather with a Griffon, 1870) [Slide 12], a reflection of the classical academic approach. (2) In his next phase, Impressionism, paintings of nudes displayed an interest in the play of light and shadows on his model's skin and atmospheric effects (1875-76) [Slide 13]; hair color changed and red became more common. (3) A change in his subject and style was connected with his decision to emulate the old masters who painted nudes; during an Ingres-like period his figures often became more stiff and stilted (Bathers, 1887) [Slide 14] and according to Hanson were less sought after. The period has been labeled Renoir's “hard” or “harsh” period.
(4) A trend toward heavy Rubens- or Titian-like, less realistic nudes was accentuated as Renoir became more and more debilitated. He became obsessed with nudes, in which he was less interested previously. In addition his focus on nudes stemmed from the appearance of Gabrielle Renard as his wife's helper after Aline gave birth to their second child, Jean, in 1893. Although not hired with that in mind, this beautiful, gypsy-like teenager turned out to be an excellent model. Eventually his nudes became the large monumental statuesque women of his final years.

In contrast to the sadness of the self portraits of 1910 the numerous nudes he painted became increasing heavy to the point that Mary Cassatt objected to the "awful pictures of enormously fat red women with small heads" (Stevenson, p.173). (Two Bathers, 1918-19 [Slide15, Repeat of Slide 1?], [Slide 16]). Canaday (1959) later concurred. He called them grotesque. "By one standard of comparison Renoir has exaggerated his former virtues beyond the point of tolerance and to the point of absurdity; by another, he has reached the only logical conclusion to the basic conception that he stated nearly fifty years earlier in Bather with Griffon (1870). The heavy, rolling, glowing masses of the late paintings may be grotesque as female figures, but they are magnificent as abstract expressions where color and form in themselves have finally become fully identified with the omnipotent and indestructible fertility of nature" (pp. 220-221). Canaday is certainly right when he recognizes the power contained in these huge nudes. Renoir's identification with the forces of nature as he equates nature and the naked women is apparent.
Early in 1915, his intense dejection was relieved to a degree after he was introduced to a new model, sixteen-year old Andree (called Dedee Hessling by Stevenson, 1991, and Andree Heuschling by White, 1984). Hanson (1968) states: "She had red hair, the full figure he loved, and was the acme of youthful high spirits...He was transformed...responding to her youth, he re-created it on canvas as though he too were young—as indeed he was in everything but years and body" (p. 291). She posed for The Bathers of 1918-19 (Stevenson, 1991) (when Renoir was 77-78) in which she is clearly much heavier than a photograph shows her to be, demonstrating that the largeness of the women he painted at that time was not determined solely by the appearance of his models, but grew out of his own needs. Denial was prominent among the mechanisms Renoir employed to deal with the horrible reality of his life at that time and the sadness that threatened him.

Although Renoir reveled in young women, the immensity of his late nudes suggests a maternal association. They possess a soft but powerful motherly mass with which one can unite and be protected. A portrait of his wife Aline in 1910 [Slide 18] demonstrates her maternal largeness; as noted above, Aline was a caring protective woman who organized Renoir’s life and protected his children.

The reader may surmise that Renoir’s paralysis of his hand and his difficulty in grasping his paint brush may have contributed to his painting huge nudes with little detail, nudes that looked like boneless balloons. In fact Renoir was able to paint details, as seen in his painting of Ambroise Vollard, the art dealer, in 1917. [Slide 18]. I suggest however that painting details required extra effort.

[Slide 16, Aline Renoir as a mature, older woman]

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6 Renoir’s son Jean married Andree after his father’s death.
CONCLUSION

Although the use of denial is commonplace in persons with serious, painful, life-threatening illnesses, for Renoir a lifelong propensity for denial further facilitated its use. I suggest that, using the mechanism of denial in fantasy (A. Freud, 1936), Renoir imagined as he became more and more fragile: I am not a thin, wasted, old person, whose lack of fat affords no protection for my bones whose sharp angular projections cause pain and sores as they press against the chairs I sit on and the bed I lie on. I do not suffer the pain of arthritis. I am a young and powerful, large heavy woman, well buffered from the pain-inducing outer world. I can be loved and protected by the powerful and caring woman I identify with and whom I love. These fantasies were no doubt unconscious. Obviously the denial was not totally successful in combating Renoir's depressive affect; as his remarks and self portraits reveal, his sadness was often present despite his defense against them, a not uncommon occurrence.

Adriani, Gotz (1999) Renoir. Printed in Germany. Distributed by Yale University Press


Hanson, Lawrence (1968) Renoir. The Man, the Painter and His World. N.Y.: Dodd, Mead.


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