

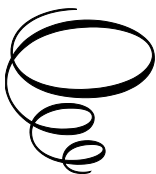
Kitsch, Propaganda, and the American Avant-Garde

Kitsch, Propaganda, and the American Avant-Garde

By

Michael J. Pearce

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



Kitsch, Propaganda, and the American Avant-Garde

By Michael J. Pearce

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2023 by Michael J. Pearce

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-9411-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-9411-1

**This book is dedicated to my father Ronald Pearce,
and to my beautiful wife, Aihua.**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgments | ix |
| Introduction | x |
| Bohemian Rhapsody..... | 1 |
| The Birth of the Avant-Garde..... | 23 |
| Red Stars..... | 35 |
| Rejects | 60 |
| Individuals and Anarchists | 78 |
| Socialist Realism | 100 |
| The Fisher King..... | 117 |
| Plumber's Wages..... | 138 |
| Miscarriage..... | 162 |
| Man at the Crossroads | 178 |
| Red Right Hand..... | 201 |
| Primitive | 219 |
| Dark Arts | 234 |
| The Day of German Art..... | 260 |
| The Kitsch Antinomy | 278 |
| An American Avant-Garde..... | 291 |

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| French Fry | 319 |
| Elephant..... | 358 |
| Bibliography..... | 383 |
| Index..... | 392 |

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not have written this book without the help of many people and institutions.

Melissa Pincus, Nancy Kim, Lala Badal, and Jennette Bristol were all tremendously supportive and helpful at the Pearson Library at California Lutheran University. Julian Baker was a generous host, allowing me to visit his home to see the entire archive of materials left by his stepfather Clifford Wight.

I am exceedingly indebted to my beloved Aihua Zhou Pearce, to Joseph Bravo, David Ian Rose, and to Graham Toms for allowing me to read drafts of the chapters to them, and for their constructive support. Your patience and encouragement made this book possible.

Conversely, my selfless editor Jim Willis dedicated many, many hours reading the manuscript to me and we spent countless thoroughly enjoyable mornings and afternoons worrying about punctuation, and style, and words. Without his thorough attention to detail, this book would not be as readable as it is. I am so very grateful to you, Jim.

I used archive materials from:

The American Presidency Project
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Leo Baeck Institute Archives, Memoir Collection
Julian Baker Archive
C.I.A. Records
Varian Fry papers, Columbia University
Gallica
Randall Bytwerk Archive of German Propaganda, Calvin College
National Archives, Records of the Office of Strategic Services
Oral History Program, University of California Los Angeles
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum
Ralph Stackpole papers, Bancroft Library, Berkeley
Syracuse University Libraries Special Collections Research Center

INTRODUCTION

Some conversations sow the seeds of doubt and provoke more questions than answers. But some, through careful investigation and determination, tease out the threads of truth and resolve the annoyances of uncertainty into a satisfying, almost climactic conclusion. For years Joseph Bravo and I have had a very long conversation about the nature of art. Every week, sometimes two or three times a week, we have spoken about the nature of the avant-garde and the nature of representational art, and the nature of painting and sculpture. We have talked for thousands of hours about these subjects, and dissected them with fresh insights. The currents of this singular, deep conversation have risen and fallen following the swells and dips of our lives, and have developed an irregular rhythm punctuated by delights and celebrations, deaths and crises. We have talked together on three continents, on telephones, through Facebook messenger applications, in person, and at home, but in all these various locations and through all this media, there was always one conversation that threaded itself through the dialogue. This book would not exist if we had not had this conversation. Sometimes Joe wrote one of his famous social media comments and I recognized my ideas in this. Sometimes I wrote a chapter and Joe heard his ideas in that. The dialogue has become a synthesis of thought, and by now it's hard to separate whose thought originated in whose head.

It began as a conversation about the corrosive relationship between kitsch and representational art that began soon after I had published my first book, *Art in the Age of Emergence*. I wanted to know why the acidic idea of kitsch was so pervasive in the hostile 20th century rhetoric that was aimed at representational painting. It didn't make sense.

According to the theorists who dominated the American avant-garde, kitsch was the antithesis of true art. Kitch was fake, and evil, and sentimental, and did not deserve to be included with serious art. The idea originated with Plato's expulsion of the artists from his ideal republic because their imitations of objects were three steps removed from the One, the maker of the universe. All ideas of things began with this creator, and all reality was an imitation of these ideas – consequently artists could only imitate an imitation - and therefore their doubly imitative work could never represent the truth, but only appeal to the untrustworthy sentiments of the viewer, not his detached, analytical, philosophical self. The idea of kitsch was

tied to representational art with a Gordian knot. The truth about twentieth century art is sharp enough to cut the knot.

Although the vast majority of ordinary, non-specialist people clearly favored representational art – comics, magazine illustrations, posters, calendars - most art magazines and academic writers refused to pay any attention to it. What inspired this classist elitism and this tremendous hostility to popular art? Why did America abandon its venerable artistic traditions of representation? Where did the avant-garde come from, and what, exactly, was it? Avant-gardism finds its historical roots in socialist thought. Why then, was the capitalist, deeply materialist American avant-garde elitist and anti-populist? Surely, if avant-garde art was socialist, it should represent the proletariat - why then, were certain works of art held up as exemplars when there was no obvious relationship to class struggle in them? Why did America's bourgeois industrialist aristocrats and political leaders support avant-gardism?

At first, I thought that the book would be a pleasant study defending the ideas behind the sensual representational art of the past and the present, but it soon became clear that without the avant-garde, kitsch simply didn't exist. To answer my questions, I had to examine the history of avant-gardism, to understand what it was, where it came from and why it came into being.

Avant-garde art had its proto-communist origins in France, where it was conceived as a militant tool explicitly wielded for propagandizing the revolutionary cause of collectivists, then later fully applied under the tyranny of the Soviet Union. Although the avant-garde originally belonged to bohemia, it was not the dominant strain of bohemia that its politically-motivated proponents claimed. Avant-garde was a sub-thread of the symbiosis of the bohemians and the bourgeoisie that has existed since the French and American revolutions overthrew the old aristocratic order and engendered the modern, post-feudal, bourgeois, capitalist culture we still live in today. Bohemia simply cannot survive without bourgeois capitalism. Since those revolutions, bohemian artists have continually attempted to satisfy the bourgeoisie's hunger for novelty within the free market economy. Whenever government has been involved in art, it has distorted the natural interdependence that connected the bourgeoisie and the bohemians.

Although bohemians frequently oppose bourgeois values and deliberately subvert them, that is part of their function within our complex society of the spectacle, and their endless rebellion is an essential part of the capitalist marketplace for art. Although governments have attempted to re-route the bohemian narrative by funding artists for their propaganda, the rapid disintegration of avant-garde into the poorly-named era of

postmodernism at the end of the cold war quickly revealed how, when bohemia was left to its own devices, political art was a subset within the bohemian rebellion, and most certainly did not encompass the entirety of its art. True bohemians admire anarchic and novel creativity. True bohemians would rather die than join any club that would have them as a member, and prioritize making art over everything else, including politics. True bohemians are Marxists – but they follow Groucho, not Karl.

A lot of art history is written backwards, by first looking at images, and then deciphering their meanings and their relevance, as if it were artists who shaped the destiny of culture. Actually, art always follows money, whether it is found in the hands of the wealthy who wish to decorate their homes, or in the hands of powerful ideological governments. In the twentieth century the American avant-garde became a propaganda tool, and vast amounts of money flowed into it from the hands of the powerful, who used it to shape the minds of their people. There is always a complex relationship between art, money, and power guiding the erratic development of cultural streams. In *Kitsch, Propaganda, and the American Avant-Garde*, I have especially looked for these relationships in the history of the avant-garde. The American avant-garde did not achieve its position only because certain bohemian artists decided to follow a primrose path of reductively exploring media rather than mimesis, but also because very large sums of money changed hands, because it suited political needs, especially those of Nelson Rockefeller and Franklin Roosevelt, who astutely saw the necessity for crafting art into domestic propaganda, first in the form of paying for huge amounts of social realist painting in an attempt to raise America from the great depression, and then quite deliberately switching to funding individualist avant-gardism as a counter to the impressive aesthetic efforts of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.

The depression led many to think that (Karl) Marx was the antidote to capitalist failures, and many of Roosevelt's New Dealers were enthusiastic socialists. Those involved in the Federal Art Projects claimed the powerful support of two ideological pillars: the Mexican muralists and the aesthetics of John Dewey. The principle Mexican muralists, Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and José Orozco were all staunch communists of different varieties, and John Dewey was a socialist democrat supporter of Leon Trotsky.

With these Marxist pillars supporting the temple of American art, it was inevitable that when Stalin revealed the extent of his tyranny by allying himself to Hitler to attack Poland, the United States should seek an alternative to the embarrassment of using social realism – which was now clearly the art of the enemy - as its propaganda. Both Stalin and Hitler had

embraced representational art to propagandize their people, and oppressed individualism. In 1939, Rockefeller and Roosevelt opened their arms to American avant-garde art to symbolize the individual liberty of America's citizens. Using the Museum of Modern Art as its flagship, this newly branded American avant-garde became a weapon precisely at the beginning of the Second World War, when Hitler's aesthetic state required an allied response. After 1939, the word 'avant-garde' was used in a new, assertive, and specifically American context by Clement Greenberg and Edward Jewell, to describe anti-conservative, radically individualist, progressive art, deliberately positioned as the antithesis of representational art.

Kitsch, Propaganda, and the American Avant-Garde provides a path through the last three centuries of art history that has been neglected in the received narrative of the avant-garde hegemony. I have depended upon first-hand accounts and sources as much as possible, because I dislike the artificial and saccharine flavor of propaganda that stains many of the histories I have tasted, and I don't want my readers to taste it in my writing. I sincerely hope the book will make the acolytes of the avant-garde uncomfortable, because while they have imagined themselves to be rebellious and cutting-edge and counter-cultural, in fact the US government has used them as either oblivious or willing tools of the state. This is the elephant in the avant-garde room.

Michael J. Pearce
Thousand Oaks, Spring 2023

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

“The greater number of our contemporaries who display the noblest blazonry of art have been Bohemians, and amidst their calm and prosperous glory they often recall, perhaps with regret, the time when, climbing the verdant slope of youth, they had no other fortune in the sunshine of their twenty years than courage, which is the virtue of the young, and hope, which is the wealth of the poor.”¹

Henry Murger, *Bohemians of the Latin Quarter*

The industrial revolution had dramatic consequences upon France. It produced a proletarian class of workers whose hands fashioned products for the consumption of the capitalist society, and a bourgeois class of people who controlled the means of production through their ownership of businesses, or through financial control, and it also created the circumstances for the prosperity of a petite-bourgeoisie, which rose from the proletariat to create a burgeoning class of people who were neither entirely dependent on their own labour to generate an income, nor rich enough to employ large numbers of workers to do the work for them.

The bourgeois class had been developing slowly since before the Renaissance, but with the wealth brought to them by the innovations of the industrial revolution this class of city-dwellers had flourished. The revolutions that transformed Europe and America in the 18th and 19th centuries were essentially bourgeois revolutions that saw the monarchy and aristocracy of the obsolete feudal system lose their grip on power. No more divine right of kings – now the government was to be representative of the people, a constitutional rule by elected officials. The bourgeoisie protected itself. As this huge and booming class of people thrived, it stratified: at the top of the social ladder the “haute-bourgeoisie” were the major controllers of wealth and of the means of production – the people we now call the 1% – and at the bottom, the aspiring petite-bourgeoisie were working class people who wanted to raise themselves up, to own property, and live the good life. Between the two, the bulk of the bourgeoisie made up the middle class. Beneath the petit-bourgeois were the proletariat, who were the people who worked in return for a wage.

It was in this new, bourgeois world that a new kind of art rose up, leavened by the bohemians. The bourgeoisie wanted pictures of themselves, and pictures of the things that interested them, but they wanted them on

demand, not as the product of patronage. Art was no longer the product of the court, in which artists might be supported for life upon aristocratic whims, now it was merchandise to be bought and sold in the marketplace like any other product. But while art was merely a specialized consumer product to the bourgeoisie, to the bohemians it was the most important thing in the world.

A bohemian is a person who chooses a rebelliously individualistic, unconventional, anti-bourgeois, and usually impoverished lifestyle in order to be able to pursue an artistic vocation. It seems likely that the first literary use of the word to describe impoverished artists living a libertine life came as early as 1790, in an obscure novel titled *The Bohemians*, written by the Marquis de Pelleport while he was imprisoned in the Bastille for four years for profiting from writing scurrilous libels (one of his cellmates was another fallen libertine, the Marquis de Sade, who wrote *Justine* during the same period). But hardly anyone read the novel; it almost disappeared without trace amid the turmoil that followed the revolution, and only a handful of copies survive in library archives today. Nevertheless, something resembling the gypsy lives of post-revolutionary artists – the prototypical bohemian lifestyle – had been described, and it flourished namelessly in the cheap districts on the outskirts of Paris, where young artists congregated, filled with hope that they might live the artistic life, and shape a career for themselves.

In English, ‘bohemian’ had quickly entered the lexicon as a euphemism for ‘gypsy.’ Appropriately, one of its early appearances was theatrical, when it was used in 1832 to describe the costume of a gypsy character in a play titled *La Tour de Nesle*, by Alexandre Dumas. Mary Shelley used the word to describe a horde of gypsies in her *Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* of 1830, and Walter Scott used it in the same year in his *The Astrologer*.

Something of the disreputable character of artistic bohemians as subversives was already becoming evident in Scott’s novel *Quentin Durward*, which included a chapter titled *The Bohemians*. In the introduction to the novel, Scott describes gypsy bohemians infiltrating and causing dissent throughout France: “*A hundred secret combinations existed in the different provinces of France and Flanders; numerous private emissaries of the restless Louis, Bohemians, pilgrims, beggars, or agents disguised as such, were everywhere spreading the discontent which it was his policy to maintain in the dominions of Burgundy.*” The “*damned bohemians*” of the story were “*vagabonds,*” “*cursed,*” “*faithless,*” and “*outcasts.*”

Although these characters were actually gypsies, not artists, Scott’s readers learned directly about the individualist lifestyle from the mouth of a bohemian character who had no religion, no home, and no property except

"the clothes which I wear, and the horse I ride on." Scott's bohemians were *"descended from the sage Chaldeans, who did read the mysteries of the stars in the plains of Shinar,"* and he cast his principal gypsy, Zingaro, as a palm-reader. He lived under no law, and acknowledged no obedience to anyone unless it suited him. He lived freely, with no allegiance to any master: *"I eat when I am hungry, drink when I am thirsty, and have no other means of subsistence than chance throws in my way."* His perplexed questioner demanded of him, *"What is it that remains to you, deprived of government, domestic happiness, and religion?"* The bohemian's answer was, *"I have liberty ...I crouch to no one—obey no one—respect no one. I go where I will—live as I can—and die when my day comes."*² His casually independent amorality was libertine, and while he had lived as a free and anarchic spirit, he had also murdered and stolen without conscience.

But it was in France that the word was used to describe a certain species of decadent young artists. In 1834, the journalist Felix Pyat wrote a sarcastic description of these artists, using the word "bohemian" to describe them. Already Paris was flooded with young people who enthusiastically pursued the artistic life – Pyat said they had all caught a disease, which he called "artistism." He said that the youths who had caught this contagion all showed the same symptoms of decline – it manifested itself first as a sickness in the brain which attacked reason – first to go was the use of razor and soap, and the afflicted victim's beard was sure to grow rapidly. Then he would change his appearance – his hair would grow long, his skin colour would turn leaden, and his voice would be affected. Soon he would develop a taste for writing poetry and a thirst for drinking punch, heavy smoking, and acquiring substantial debts.

The treatment for the contagion of artistism was to avoid intimacy and gaiety, to eat solid food, to stop going to vaudeville shows, skip admiring sunsets, quit daydreaming, and resume shaving. Leaving Paris was the most effective cure, along with abandoning any interest in the Middle Ages, studying mathematics, returning to provincial society and putting on a white cravat, the uniform of the bourgeoisie. But an even more effective treatment of the truly desperate could be made by *"the application of scissors to the head, and a daily regime of the razor."*³ Mocking pretension, Pyat said everyone in Paris claimed they were an artist, even a Dr. Allbutt, who had invented a contraceptive douche pump called a 'clysopompe,' and *"hairdressers, vaudevillians, glass-makers, theater shareholders, pedicurists, coffee boys, deputies, scrapers, fashion merchants, the Minister of Fine Arts, ticket-sellers, trick dogs, the academicians, educated elephants, working fleas, the men and beasts of Franconi's circus."*⁴ Art was like a religious cult which everybody wanted to join, but its true priests were the

real artists, and nothing, not even all the long hair in the world, would help those aspirants who were not creative in any way – these fake bohemians might as well be members of the national guard, polishing their equipment.

Nevertheless, the subculture gradually grew. The poet and journalist Théophile Gautier described a passionate, romantic embrace of art as the defining principle of the bohemians: *“One and the same characteristic is common to all the early works of that period: overflowing lyricism and striving after passion. The main points of the programme which every man endeavored to carry out to the best of his ability, the ideals and the secret desires of the Romanticist youth, were to freely develop every caprice of thought, even if it offended taste, conventionality, and rule; to hate and repel to the utmost of one's power the profane vulgar, as Horace called it, the grocers, Philistines, or bourgeois, as the mustachioed and long-haired young painter students named them; to celebrate love in terms that might set fire to the paper on which one wrote; to set it up as the sole end and sole means of happiness, and to sanctify and deify Art, which was to be upheld as a second Creator.”*⁵

The bohemians experimented with hashish and opium. Napoleon Bonaparte's armies had discovered hash-eating while they were in Egypt, and brought it back to France with them, where it aroused great interest among people who heard of its apparently imagination-enhancing gifts.

In the 1830s, Gautier and his romanticist friends drank at the Petit Moulin Rouge, then a simple red-painted tavern in the great waste spaces of the Champs-Élysées before their development, among a few dodgy bars scattered among a sprinkle of houses in the shade of dark trees along the roadway to Neuilly. It was a simple whitewashed room with sand strewn over the floor to catch the spills and spit of drinkers, and a tin-covered countertop, with earthenware cups and jugs, simple iron cutlery, benches, and tables repurposed from wood planks pulled from old boats. A room was reserved for club dinners, and a private room was available for the monied folk, opening out to a hillside garden available for wine and beer. Here they indulged their romantic fantasies of living like Lord Byron at Newstead Abbey. Gautier declared that his friend Gérard de Nerval once made a cup from the skull of a soldier he took from his father's collection of anatomical samples, and the company solemnly drank wine from it as a gesture aimed against the bourgeoisie, *“through sheer bravado, and weariness and disgust of your solemn stupidity.”*⁶

The artists gathered in the poorer parts of the city, where they could afford to live in studio spaces that allowed them to develop their creative work without the expense of high rents such spaces would cost in wealthier parts of the metropolis, although some bohemians were in favor of

establishing communes in the countryside, following the utopian principles of Charles Fourier. Sexual license, free love, permissiveness, drug and alcohol use, and communal living, characterized the urban bohemian life. The bohemians had an argot of their own, a filigree of phrases composed of the jargon of the ateliers and the prose of the pamphleteers, an idiomatic salsa of flowery phraseology muddled with the coarseness of street slang, and the craft of lyric poetry. They spoke like Cyrano de Bergerac, with quick irony, and sharp intelligence, using a language nearly incomprehensible to outsiders, with a vocabulary that was, "...*the hell of rhetoric and the paradise of neologism.*"⁷ Pyat describes them using an elitist argot similar to Pig Latin, replacing the last syllable of each word with a commonplace term. Thus, the word "grocer" would become "groce-mar;" an "artist," an "artis-mar."

They tried to stand out from the bourgeoisie by wearing eccentric clothes, unfashionable flat Dutch hats of soft felt, velvet cloaks tossed dramatically over the shoulder, doublets and frogged jackets, and braided Hungarian coats.⁸ Gautier liked to wear a kaftan and fez, rather than the bourgeois uniform of hat and coat. Describing the mood, Gautier said, "*A sap of new life was running hotly; everything was germinating, budding, blooming at one and the same time; intoxicating scents filled the air, which itself went to the head; men were drunk with lyrism and art.*"⁹ It was a brilliant time. Gautier said, "*It was all so youthful, so new, so richly colored, and of so strange and intoxicating a savor, that it turned our heads and we seemed to be entering into unknown worlds.*"¹⁰ The theatre was in turmoil with the introduction of new dramas led by Victor Hugo. Eugène Delacroix had smashed down the doors of the salon with his romanticism. Hector Berlioz appeared to be single-handedly reinventing music. Walter Scott was in full flow. A new translation of the works of William Shakespeare by Pierre Le Tourneur had reintroduced the great playwright to Parisian intellectuals. Lord Byron's poetry had made the exotic east feel immediate, and inviting. Nerval published a French translation of Goethe's *Faust* in 1828, twenty years after its first edition in German.

When Hugo heard early in 1830 that classicists planned to disrupt the opening of his new play *Hernani* by hissing the performance, he placed Nerval in charge of recruiting a large crowd of enthusiastic young romantics, thus ensuring that the drama would be applauded as much as it was hissed, and would certainly get the attention of the press. By now Gautier was among Nerval's friends, and gleefully received six of the tickets from him, given to him upon his solemn assurances that he would bring only trusted men to the performance. From friends at his art school (he was then an aspiring painter) Gautier chose two "*ferocious romantics who would*

willingly have fed upon the body of a member of the academy."¹¹ They were joined by two young poets and one of his cousins. They even had a password, "*Hierro*," stamped onto the bright red tickets Nerval had prepared for his recruits.

To prepare themselves for the opening these young bohemians deliberately raided the second-hand clothes stores, creating crazy capriccios of costume, from all periods of history, dressed in mad costumes for the event, deliberately contrary to the conventional black suit customarily worn to the theatre. A contemporary drawing of the audience at the premiere shows a crowd of men in an extravagant variety of get-ups, their heads like a barbershop clip-book of hirsute tonsures, and in the foreground a short, pretty, long-haired person, who is either an effeminate young man, or a cross-dressing young woman, gazing directly at the viewer, besuited and posing in the classic stance of an aesthete, contrapposto with arms akimbo, one hand stretched out to rest upon the head of an angled cane, its point at the toe of a shining shoe, and the other hand placed assertively on their hip. Gautier famously wore an absurdly bright red waistcoat, made especially for the event. He loved the color and wanted to reclaim it from the revolutionaries of 1789, and carefully avoided the pure revolutionary red by dyeing the Chinese vermilion satin himself with a little admixture of purple. To offset the waistcoat, he wore light sea-green trousers trimmed with black velvet and a grey overcoat with a green satin lining.¹² It was a costume deliberately designed to irritate the bourgeois opposition and it made such an impression that people still spoke of it when talking about Gautier years later.

The event was more dramatic than the play. The classicists who wanted French theatre to retain its elegant but static formulas hissed, but the bohemians, passionate romantics who were sick of the stagnant conventions that had frozen poetry and drama into a rigid formula, and wanted feeling and desire to pervade the arts, cheered. Arguments and scuffles broke out while the actors attempted to deliver their lines. Gautier attended the play thirty times as a member of Hugo's *claque*, and he and his friends could recite all the words of the play by heart and often ran through it to amuse themselves.

The bohemian subculture had arrived and would persist throughout the next two centuries, emerging in all of the major cities of democratic capitalist states. As bourgeois capitalism spread throughout the world, it carried bohemia with it. Far away across the Atlantic, the Americans were too busy settling their new lands and fighting out their nasty civil war to focus on building an artistic culture, and the undisputed international epicenter of the bohemian-bourgeois art world of the 19th century was Paris.

The socialist revolution of 1848 was bloodily crushed. A persecution of the leftists followed, with mass shootings, deportations, and censorship employed among the tools of their destruction. Soon there was little thought of rebellion against the new regime. After Louis-Napoleon's coup in 1851 the pendulum of political extremes paused in its wild swings between communal utopianism and imperial ambition, and France settled into the relative stability of the Second Empire. Violence and bloodshed on the streets had played their part in the coup which gave the new emperor dictatorial authority, but in many ways Louis-Napoleon was a benevolent and popular ruler, and managed to hold onto power for almost twenty years. Friedrich Engels said Louis-Napoleon had become "*the idol of the European bourgeoisie precisely by dissolving their parliament but increasing their profits.*"¹³

He had earned some disdain because he had seized imperial authority in the wake of a trade crisis that had been disastrous for French production, in which exports declined, business took a beating, many factories were shuttered, and the European trade community was on the brink of a panic. This economic stagnation was blamed upon his political struggle with the assembly. Having seized dictatorial power, he revived the economy, re-established universal suffrage, modernized banking, agriculture, and labour law. He built an efficient railway system which made possible the rapid development of heavy industry, and with it the growth of a powerful and prosperous bourgeoisie. The magnetic power of manufacturing drew flocks of people to factories as it grew in scale. Of every seven individuals born in the countryside between 1850 and 1900, five would move to the cities, one would emigrate to America, and one would remain at home.¹⁴ Under Louis-Napoleon's authority, the French stock market flourished and investment blossomed. Engels was right – the bourgeoisie saw him as one of their own: "*...in him the bourgeoisie saw the first great statesman, who was flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone,*" he wrote.¹⁵ It was Louis-Napoleon who shaped the modern Paris we see today, a city built for the bourgeoisie, the finest city on earth.

A year before Louis-Napoleon led the French army into the disastrous Franco-Prussian war of 1870, James Jarves, the celebrated American art critic and collector of 18th century paintings and sculptures, said the emperor had turned Paris into a, "*well-scrubbed, waxed, polished, gorgeous town, imposing in its topographical arrangement, geometrically accurate, and largely conceived, pleasurably adorned after a scenic method and as entirely admirably calculated to make the same agreeable impression on a vast scale on a spectator at first view that one of its tastefully ordered shop windows or an admirable toilette of a Parisian lady does in a small way.*"¹⁶

A devout lover of classicism, Jarves hated it. He complained about the long modern boulevards like the Avenue de l'Opera, with its gilt balconies, idiotic carvings, trumpery ornaments, the sheet-glass windows and shopping arcades, "...brilliant as gaud for the eye, but vanity of vanities as food for the imagination." It was, "...a brilliant bazaar, café and theatre; in truth, a well baited trap for money and morals."¹⁷ It was a new world – and this new world needed a new kind of artist to create its products.

In 1863, thirty-three years after the *Hernani* premier, critic Fernand Desnoyers described the artists of Montmartre: "*Generally, they are unsavory individuals. They affect in their gait, in their dress, in their language, a flippancy that would prove that art alone preoccupies them. The contours and vulgar haircuts of their faces make them hateful to the eyes before the ears are hurt by their voices, for a horrible vulgarity comes out of them through every pore and through every sense.*

They create a public image for themselves, which would be excusable if they could understand the insufficiency of those which nature has made them; but no, it is merely a stupid pretension: they want to attract the attention of the bourgeois, in the bars.

To make a big public image, they flip their long hair back, tousle it or stick it behind the ear, part it in the middle of the head, or wear it in the style of a malcontent, then let their beard grow, which they trim with the same art.

A bizarre note arises from their examination. After a short time, intimacy gives them all the same voice, the same gestures, the same words, the same attitude.

If one of them gets himself up in one way, two days later his pal is similarly dressed. Baggy overcoats and broad-brimmed felt hats are of their taste: they are chic or have character, they say.

But most often they are to be seen in the neighborhoods or sitting in cafes, dressed in casual trousers with large checks, red smocks and straw hats, berets, or more simply bareheaded.

They share with actors a mania for over-familiarity, and it is precisely this which most quickly provokes disgust for them in a man.

They never meet without greeting each other with this sacramental phrase, 'Hello, love, how are you doing?' A few words of slang add clumsy sparkle to their conversation."¹⁸

The bohemians are often explained as anti-bourgeois, and they have often poured contempt upon their enemy. Baudelaire wrote contemptuously, "*The Frenchman is a farmyard animal so well domesticated that he dares not jump any fences. See his tastes in art and literature. He is a Latin animal; garbage in his home does not displease him, and in literature he is*

scatophagous. He loves feces. The bistro litterateurs call this the Gallic soil."¹⁹ But the more one looks at this fascinating tribe, the more one sees that they are simply the other side of the bourgeois coin. Art provided bohemian artists with an entrance into bourgeois wealth, and allowed them to become bourgeois themselves with astonishing rapidity when success came knocking. More often than not, bohemians were born of bourgeois families, and virtually everything they said and did was a response to the values and habits of the bourgeois class. Living in poverty by no means meant that bohemians were proletarian, for they simply did not share the concerns of the working class; their poverty was an aesthetic choice, and was often a temporary state to be endured as a rite of passage.

Artists have always been the social inferiors of their patrons, and although their clientele had changed since the beginning of the 19th century, their status remained the same. Before the revolutions that propelled the bourgeoisie to power, art collectors were aristocrats who patronized artists, granting those who possessed special talent with protection and wealth as the servants of power. After the industrial revolution, the art-purchasing market expanded downward through society to include members of the middle and upper-middle class. No longer the exclusive domain of the aristocracy, art became a product to be bought and sold – merchandise to be marketed. Bohemians willingly allowed themselves and their material products to be exploited by their customers in exchange for a middle-class life, while simultaneously adopting a defensive anti-materialist position which justified their social inferiority.

Before becoming a great novelist, Émile Zola had been a prolific journalist, writing hundreds of columns of cultural criticism, going from job to job with no guarantee whatsoever of security. But the insecurities of freelance journalism were a dramatic improvement upon the desperate destitution he felt between 1858 and 1867, when he was an absolutely impoverished bohemian, moving from one garret to another. Although from a bourgeois family, unlike many of his bohemian friends Zola lacked financial support because, when he was only seven years old, his engineer father, François, had died, and his mother, Émilie, struggled to support herself on the small inheritance her husband had left her. In the cold winter of 1861, Zola was so broke that he sold most of his clothes, spent the season in bed, and was reported to have eaten sparrows that he trapped on his windowsill and roasted. In 1862, he managed to find a job packing books for a publishing company, *Hachette*, which paid 100 francs a month, just enough to sustain him. He believed that this meant he could leave the bohemian life behind him, but he was deeply rooted in the Parisian subculture, and it would be many years before he could count himself as a

solid bourgeoisie. He stayed at *Hachette* until the end of January 1866, having worked his way to being head of publicity, and writing journalism in his spare time. Among his friends during this period were luminaries like his childhood friend Paul Cézanne, who he supported financially for many years.

In 1863, the year of the *Salon des Refusés*, Zola was 23, Cézanne turned 24, Édouard Manet 31, Henri Fantin-Latour 27, Edgar Degas 29, Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) was an old man of 43, Camille Pissarro 33, Claude Monet 23, Alfred Sisley 24, James Abbott McNeill Whistler 29. Pierre-Auguste Renoir was only 22. Although gypsy bohemians often critiqued their bourgeois patrons, they couldn't exist without them, and the majority of them were the children of bourgeois families, sucking in bourgeois values at their mothers' bourgeois breasts. Their bohemian lives were often made possible because the wealth of their parents allowed them to entertain the idea of life as an artist. Cézanne received a monthly allowance from his banker father. Manet was the son of a judge and came from a very wealthy haute-bourgeois family. Fantin-Latour was the son of a portrait painter, and well acquainted with the bohemian-bourgeois life of a working artist. Degas was another well-off banker's son. The pioneer photographer Nadar was the son of a petit-bourgeois book-seller and printer and had been a medical student until his father's death. Pissarro's petit-bourgeois father owned a hardware store on St. Thomas Island in the Virgin Islands, and he had been sent to a middle-class boarding school in France. Monet was from a family of well-off ship-chandlers; Sisley from prosperous silk-merchants who gave him a healthy allowance; Whistler was the bohemian son of a railway engineer, living in Paris on his allowance from his bourgeois mother; Renoir struggled more than the rest of the group, coming from modest tailors.

Zola called these loosely affiliated young bohemian artists the Batignolles Group, named after the street on which Zola and Manet made their homes. Here they frequented their favourite brasserie, where the friends gathered to talk. The Batignolles district was a bohemian center of Paris in the 1860s. It was not until 1866 that Zola championed the Batignolles' work, and savagely criticized the jury of the famous salon, in a series of seven articles titled *Mon Salon*, recognizing his friends' realism as a new kind of art which these ignorant jurors were unable to appreciate. His campaign on their behalf was disastrous for his journalistic career, for the jurors he criticised were influential and powerful. He embarrassed his employers at *Hachette* and lost his job, and his editor refused to accept any more of his writing.

Although the bourgeoisie had risen to its new position of strength after the revolutions of 1789 and 1848, it still clung to the art of the ancient regime, seeing classicism as a symbol of imperial power, longing for the wealth and prestige of the fallen aristocracy. The prosperity that came with the industrial revolution was accompanied by a dramatic growth of the population, and the new, younger generation wanted to assert itself, to take its place on the stage of Paris. This was not a politically motivated avant-garde like that which was insisted upon by the propagandists of the socialist cause. It was a generational rebellion, an artistic revolt, a youth struggle between the up-and-coming young bourgeois-bohemians and their elders. There was a different kind of rebellion.

They were confident of their ultimate victory – as Mick Jagger would say ninety years later, time was on their side. And they had the same kind of swagger as the bohemian rock stars of the 1960's – Zola described them stopping to behold Paris, almost as if the city was a woman laid out before them: "*Claude, trembling, cried 'Ah! this Paris ... she's ours, there for the taking.' All four were enthralled, their wide-open eyes shining with desire. Wasn't that glory that blew, from the height of this avenue, over the entire city? Paris was waiting there, and they wanted her. 'Well! we'll take her,' said Sandoz with a stubborn look. 'Hell, Yes!' Mahoudeau and Jory replied, plainly.*"²⁰ If he could have, Jagger would have been right there beside them, with an armful of dead flowers, and strutting in their ragged company.

By 1870, Zacharie Astruc, Otto Scholderer, Edmond Maître, and Frédéric Bazille were frequent visitors to Manet's studio, and accepted into his circle enough to be included in Fantin-Latour's painting *A Studio at Les Batignolles*. Even though this painting was made as these men were transitioning from being impoverished bohemians to flourishing bourgeoisie, they still wore tidied-up versions of the common costume of a Paris bohemian of the decades before: long hair, an eccentrically trimmed beard, a wide-brimmed hat, checked trousers, and a baggy overcoat.

Formulaic by 1870, wearing a beard in France of the Bourbons had been a big deal. Gautier joked that at the time of the opening of *Hernani* in 1830 there were only two of them in the entire country, and, "*It required absolutely heroic self-possession and contempt of the multitude to wear one.*"²¹ They were romanticist symbols of their wearers' rejection of middle-class pretensions. Hirsute bohemians were members of, "*the hairy, bearded bands that were the terror of the smooth chinned bourgeois.*"²² Another life-long bohemian-bourgeois, for all his political pretensions and financial success, was Gustave Courbet, who painted himself in this costume in 1842, and again in 1849 in his famous *Self-Portrait With a Pipe*, looking suspiciously stoned, and again in a drawing of himself with two of

his friends wearing the same costume at the Brasserie Andler, one of the vortices of bohemian Paris. The cafés Courbet visited until the 1860s were all bohemian hang-outs. As early as the 1840s, his friends included a scruffy writer named Henri Murger, who was a principal figure in the history of the bohemians.²³ In his *L'Oeuvre*, Zola described meeting an older Courbet in his austere studio, all dressed up in robe and skull-cap, like some cosplay magician.

Bohemian costume had room for dandified extravagance, and revealed the socio-economic backgrounds of the bohemians. Late in the 19th century, a conceited Montmartre playwright named Armand Silvestre nit-picked in his bitchy memoirs about who was and who wasn't a true bohemian. He described the wealthy Manet slumming it among his bohemian friends. Manet preferred a fancier costume than the baggy coat and check pants, costuming himself in "*cheerfully garish trousers, short jackets, a hat with a flat-edged brim worn on the back of the head, always irreproachably gloved in suede.*" According to the cattish Silvestre, "*Manet was absolutely not a bohemian in the slightest. His was the fashion of a dandy. Blond, with a rare and delicate beard tapered to a double point, he had an extraordinary vivacity in his eyes – small, very sparkling pale gray eyes – in the expression of the mocking mouth, – a mouth with thin lips with uneven and unequal teeth – a high dose of Parisian tomfoolery. Very generous and very good, he was easily ironic in his speech, and often cruel. He used acerbic words, cutting and shredding at once. But what effective expression, and what accuracy of ideas!*"²⁴ Attacking his literary competition, the caviling thespian said the brilliant writer and editor Gautier had been a fake bohemian too, and condemned him for being overly concerned with providing for his family, and too dedicated to religious belief. But if Gautier was a faker, he had done a thoroughly good job of it, for he was the founder of the *Club des Hachichins* (the Hashish club), which met monthly at the Hotel Lauzin in the Latin Quarter, where he and the living epitome of a true bohemian, Charles Baudelaire, rented the upstairs apartments, where Baudelaire wrote his famous collection of poems, *Les Fleurs de Mal*, which he dedicated to Gautier's name. Gautier was so completely convincing in this pastiche bohemianism that in 1856 he became editor of *L'Artiste* magazine and used his position to describe the ideas at the heart of bohemia – the doctrines of art for art's sake. Nadar photographed a middle-aged Gautier wearing the classic bohemian costume of a lumpy overcoat, with unkempt hair, tied back under a thoroughly unconventional headscarf, scruffily bearded, and with the deeply black-bagged eyes of a night-owl hash-eater. In the introduction to his infamously raunchy novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, he wrote, "*I would rather have a gaping seam in my shoe than*

a false rime to my verse, and that I would rather do without shoes than without poems."²⁵

Like the mad mixture of costumes the bohemians wore, the artistic styles of the second half of the 19th century were a mix-and-match of romanticism, of Gustave Moreau and the dreamy symbolists, of Oscar Wilde's anarchist aestheticism, of art for art's sake, of the cruel sensuality of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, of Baudelaire's dark obsession with sexuality and death, of the extravagant but fresh and delightful pornography of Félicien Rops, of Zola's novels describing the new, opulent life of the Parisian streets, of the richly detailed medieval fantasies of the pre-Raphaelites, of the fabulous illustrator Gustave Doré,²⁶ of the light and lovely plein-air painters who became known as the impressionists, of the brightly colorful canvases of the savage fauvists, and at its very end, the introduction of the luxurious, decorative paintings, sculptures, and architecture of the Viennese Secession. All of these competed with each other, jostling for attention against the backdrop of the continuing traditional classicism of the ruling order. By the end of the century there was no single dominant style, no hegemony of aristocratic authority. The socialist Proudhon had paraphrased Hegel about art being the expression of the dominant ideal of the time. If he was right, the ideal of the capitalist bourgeois era was, and still is, that consumers should enjoy a chocolate-box full of choice delights.

Like the realist art of the proto-communist avant-garde all this bohemian novelty was a new kind of work made for a new kind of world, but the claims made by its bohemian proponents were not that art must be used as a tool for propagandizing the people, or that it was for the pursuit of reality alone, but that it was for pleasure; it was a luxury, and it was a replacement for lost religion. This was an artistic rebellion that also sought to reinvent art for the new age, but certainly not for the utilitarian purpose of social reconstruction under communist authoritarianism. This art was made for the consumption of the bourgeois middle class who had the time, the money, and the inclination for amusement. To this burgeoning new middle class, who wanted the world, and wanted it now, it was entertainment. Its products were symbols of their own personal utopia.

It was not until 1851 that the word "bohemian" became commonplace. Courbet's friend Murger lived the bohemian life in Paris, and described his circle in a collection of short stories titled *Bohemians of the Latin Quarter*. He called the artists "bohémien" because the word meant "gypsy" in French, perhaps derived from the Old French "boëm," which meant "bewitched." Their romantic and impoverished lifestyle supposedly resembled that of the wandering Romani, who were said to be descended from the priests and

priestesses of Isis and Serapis, who had fled from Egypt centuries ago, making a living selling fortunes. According to the historian Étienne Pasquier, the gypsies had arrived in Paris in 1427, and begged Antipope Benedict XIV, Bernard Garnier, for refuge from Saracen persecution. He allowed them to stay, but gave them a penance of going for seven years without sleeping in a bed, establishing their itinerant tradition.²⁷

In 1896, Murger's hit book was turned into an Italian opera – Puccini's *La Bohème*. Murger wrote, "*Bohemia is a stage in artistic life; it is the preface to the Academy, the Hotel Dieu, or the Morgue.*"²⁸ When it was the academy that followed the bohemian stage, bourgeois success trotted behind. The bohemian world existed in symbiosis with the booming bourgeoisie.

Murger said there were many kinds of bohemians, beginning with, "*unknown bohemians,*" who were fatally condemned to be completely anonymous to history because of their total lack of understanding of the importance of publicity. These passionate lovers of beauty were, "*the race of obstinate dreamers for whom art has remained a faith and not a profession; enthusiastic folk of strong convictions, whom the sight of a masterpiece is enough to throw into a fever, and whose loyal heart beats high in the presence of all that is beautiful, without asking the name of the master and the school.*"²⁹ Their fault was that they believed their genius and its products were so delightful, and so obviously brilliant that they needed only to produce them, and they would soon be discovered, and plucked from obscurity. Their misfortune was that their delight in art, but complete lack of entrepreneurial skill, would surely lead them to an early death in poverty, for one of the fundamental traits of the bohemian life was that its participants were spendthrift to the point of absurdity. They might even on occasion produce a work of genius, which may be discovered purely by chance after their death.

A second group of bohemians was made of the unfortunate youths who had deceived themselves into believing that they had an artistic vocation, when really all they had was a chimerical fancy. As a proper bohemian, Cezanne joked about his own lack of success, saying that his "*hair and beard are longer than talent.*"³⁰ Members of this class were destined to die young, like their romantic heroes, Gilbert, Malfilatre, Chatterton, and Moreau, the archetypal saints of tragic bohemia. Sarcastically, Murger says Gilbert only became a poet a quarter of an hour before he died. Victor Escousse's miserable poem became the *Marseillaise* of these morbid aspirants to desperate tragic failure.

*"Farewell mankind, ye stony-hearted host,
Flint-bosomed earth and sun with frozen ray,*

*From out amidst you, solitary ghost
I glide unseen away."*

These were the absurd fakes of the bohemian world, "*the mediocrities of impotence.*" These were talentless non-entities who could only end wretchedly.

Another caste of Murger's bohemians were the amateurs, who were mere visitors to the scene, given to enjoying the adventure of life on the fringes of society, like ethno-tourists dipping into an interesting foreign culture, participating in its exotic rituals, and colorful events, dressing in its shabby-chic costumes, but never becoming true bohemians, and soon scurrying home to the safe lifestyle of a provincial bourgeoisie with a nice comfortable middle-class profession, destined to a round belly, a well-filled waistcoat, and nostalgic reminiscences of their youthful exploits shared beside a warm fire in their cosy parlour.

The real bohemians were those who genuinely had the call of the artistic vocation and stood a chance of becoming successful in their fields. This was not an easy life, navigating between the abysses of poverty and doubt, but for these talented few, at least there was a road toward success which could be perceived through the fog of bohemian self-indulgence. Only ruthless ambition could keep them on this narrow road. Although often bitten by the teeth of poverty, these profligates loved to party, and were extravagant squanderers, dissolute debtors and most importantly, hard workers.

Of course, success accorded them the trappings of the bourgeois life they claimed to despise, causing a few of them discomfort as they found wealth and felt the sting of their own hypocrisy, but then, as now, there was nothing more pathetic than an aged bohemian dragging the tawdry and tattered feathers of their former life behind them like a balding parakeet, and most bohemians willingly and cheerfully slipped into the embrace of bourgeois comfort as they aged without necessarily abandoning their individualism.

Zola knew exactly what the bohemian life was like. On March 3rd of 1861, when he was a month shy of turning 21, he wrote to his best friend Cezanne advising him how he would spend his time and money when he came to Paris. At this time the permanently bohemian Cezanne's monthly allowance from his wealthy banker father was set at 125 francs. From this he would be able to rent a room, buy lunch and dinner, rent a cheap studio, buy canvases, brushes and paints, and still have 25 francs, "*for your laundry, light, the thousand little things that come up, your tobacco, your amusements: you'll see that you have just enough to get by...*"³¹ But, like most of his bohemian brethren, Cezanne was a spendthrift. Zola told their mutual friend Baptistin Baille that whenever Cezanne had any money, he would hurry to spend it before night-time.³² While he lived as a struggling

journalist, Zola was a proper bohemian himself, and he enjoyed making use of his Batignolles friends as characters and describing their world in the novel he published in 1886 titled *L'Oeuvre*, (The Masterpiece). In it, his readers could clearly identify the scandalous paintings of Manet. Zola's sculptor character, Chaine, was a perfect example of one of Murger's "unknown bohemians." He had come from the countryside to seek his fortune as an artist in Paris, based on the slender evidence of his ability to carve walking-stick handles. His father had given him an allowance of 1000 francs to live on for one year, which he had stretched out to last for eighteen months, and when the money had run out, he started bunking with his friend and determinedly painting, "*while awaiting the promised victory*," despite the complete lack of evidence of having any talent whatsoever. Pyat had noted that voluntary poverty was one of the symptoms of the bohemian disease. This was at a time when a well-to-do worker received 5000 francs per year.

Zola's exceptional talent for brilliant detail brought his cast of bohemian artists to life, and he wrote a sparkling account of the historic *Salon des Refusés* of 1863, which was the moment at which his fictionalized bohemians took their first steps into respectability. The principal character in *l'Oeuvre*, Claude Lantier, was a composite of Manet and Cezanne. Manet experienced none of the poverty the Lantier character suffered in the book, while Cezanne was similar to him, having an excessively temperamental personality, withdrawn, over-sensitive and grumpy, and of such low social status that even children mocked him in the street. Self-consciously aware of his dirtiness, Cezanne infamously refused to shake the gentlemanly Manet's clean hand. Zola appropriated Manet's paintings as the work of the Lantier character, but Cezanne was always Lantier's heart, and even ate the same bohemian meals as his fictional double. Like Cezanne, Zola's Lantier was one of Murger's true bohemians, moving to the Quai de Bourbon, then an inexpensive part of town where he lived to save money, "*like a primitive, with an absolute contempt for everything that was not painting*." Lantier stopped seeing his bourgeois relatives who disgusted him, even breaking with his aunt who owned a charcuterie simply, "*because she was doing too well*."³³ His studies at the Louvre were a bore, and a waste of time, and he was full of contempt for students who followed the atelier instruction of the classicists, who were daubers of penny prints, who had stolen their reputations. He would prefer to cut his wrists than to continue ruining his natural eye.

Alfred Vizetelly was friendly with Zola and knew many of the real artists characterized in *l'Oeuvre*. He made an unfortunately sanitized and paraphrased translation of the book, and tells us in his preface that the sculptor