“Framing Isabel”: About Some fin-de-siècle Portraits of Ladies

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When we engage in reading a novel we expect a narrative sequence; when we engage in looking at a portrait we expect a mimetic reflection. A novel entitled *The Portrait of a Lady*¹ promises both, and addresses through its title the problem of representation in its conflicting forms. In what follows I will read, from a 21st-century perspective, Henry James’s (1843-1916) novel side by side with bourgeois representational portraits of women done by the Austrian Gustav Klimt (1862-1918).

James’s novel and Klimt’s portraits are both products of a male view of fin-de-siècle women in an emergent modern world. Around the turn of the century, portrait painting of females was thriving, despite the advent of photography, and these portraits provided one version of space within which women were imagined by men.² In the majority of these bourgeois representational portraits those depicted are imagined as detached and untouchable women, as highly eroticised objects of male desire. At that time female identities were in flux; and the traditional idea of woman was about to fall apart.

Some of my thinking below is inspired by Gilles Deleuze, who in his book about Francis Bacon³ developed a “logic of sensation” contrary to a “logic of representation”. What is interesting about this book in the context of embodiments of culture are the two notions of “figuration” and “figure” and the movement from the one to the other, which Deleuze defines as a movement of the mimetically represented body towards the non-representational figure and as a movement of body as depth towards body as purely material surface. I will argue that in both novel and pictures we may discover elements of this logic of sensation as a strategy to force the female body into a static position. In these depictions women have been stabilised, solidified within the frame of the portrait, as a seemingly last resort, a desperate strategy, to centre and to frame woman in the modern world.

In this study, I would like to first show how fin-de-siècle women can be represented as bodiless surfaces and thus as objects, a process of de-humanisation which heightens their exchange value and at the same
time exposes them to a male fetishist look captivated by sensation and the spectacular; secondly, argue that the depictions in question exclude a female view, as woman is firmly positioned as object and thus devoid of a spectatorial position of her own; thirdly, look at instances where these constructed binary oppositions, male vs. female, eye/I vs. it, are replaced with dialectically constructed and, hence, shifting positions of identity and looking; and finally, explore this dialectic by looking at both novel and pictures arguing that visible fin-de-siècle women inhabit shifting positions which can only temporarily be forced into fixation, as can be observed in the portraits in question.

Beginning with conceptions of visuality as they appear in The Portrait of a Lady in general, and in reference to Isabel Archer, the novel's protagonist, specifically, I would like to take a closer look at Isabel framed in doorways as she appears in key scenes of the novel, and then focus on female visibility as spectacle, which does not allow for woman as director of the gaze. Women who are visible are powerless as objects, but at the same time are powerful as dominant posers. This will lead to notions of surface value as a mode of representing identity in both novel and paintings, and the various patterns of objectification resulting from this strategy. In concluding, I will discuss instances of female disobedience towards the stabilising processes described, once again with reference to both novel and paintings.

Drawing parallels between a painter and a novelist seems very apt in the case of Henry James, for whom the faculty of vision had a paramount share in producing knowledge, and who referred to The Portrait of a Lady in its 1908 preface as a "canvas" for which he was seeking "the true touch" (41). This "true touch" he was trying to apply to a novel which tells the story of the young American Isabel Archer, whose European cousin and uncle furnish her with a fortune, and who, after declining the hand of two eligible suitors, is framed into a dysfunctional marriage with an artistic, and cruel, man of no means.

The Portrait of a Lady is full of fictional scenes of beholding, where "an impression" or "an image" produces knowledge. On one occasion, Madame Merle, the novel's framing matchmaker, knows from one look from a distance that Isabel Archer has fallen in love with her confidant Gilbert Osmond, who will become Isabel's mismatched husband. She deduces this knowledge from a certain constellation of bodies and a parasol (see 319). Another classic example for the close link between
vision and knowledge typical of the novel is the famous revelatory scene, when it dawns on Isabel that Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond share an intimacy she has never been aware of. This scene starts as follows: “Just beyond the threshold of the drawing room she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had received an impression” (457), and rounding up the scene we learn, “but the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light” (458). You literally see the photographer’s bulb flash, which burns on glass; the picture says it all. Knowledge is acquired through vision.

These tableaux vivants interrupt the narrative flow through static images at key moments in the novel. They work as revelatory freeze-frames and let readers and characters alike gain knowledge in the manner of a two-dimensional, synoptic overview. In *The Portrait of a Lady* images of doorways are frequent, and at key moments in the novel Isabel is seen standing in doorways in another framing strategy.

There are paradoxical aspects about these images of thresholds and framed pictures as they indicate both spaces of constraint as well as in-between spaces, in the sense of third spaces which allow for changes and moments of freedom: a door may be seen as a space that, similar to stairs, leads somewhere, and a frame around a window not only limits a view but also makes it possible in the first place. So Isabel seen within the frame of a door may not only be read as a static image of constraint but may also point towards her transitory status, as the first and final images of her in the doorways of Gardencourt indicate.

So the doors that appear at key moments of the novel represent moments of restraint and moments of change simultaneously. For a momentary freeze in time the person standing in the doorway is represented as a picture; adding the element of time we may perceive the door as an opportunity, as an indicator of change.

Isabel is introduced to the novel as “object of observation”, as a spectacle, when she makes “her appearance in the ample doorway” (69) of Gardencourt, the English country house her expatriate relatives have chosen as their home. This is the first frame she is put into and in this frame, which is “ample”, she still has room to move. She is called an “independent” woman and she directs her gaze confidently: “She was looking at everything, with an eye that denoted clear perception – at her companion, at the dogs, at the two gentlemen under the trees, at the beautiful scene that surrounded her” (70). She is taking possession of everything visually; she is the focaliser and her surroundings the
focalised. In these first moments at Gardencourt “she lingered so near the threshold”, from where she presents herself as a picture. This lingering state indicates her in-between status: she does not yet occupy any space properly, as she will do later in her appearance as “the picture of a gracious lady” (418), when she is iconified in her marriage with Osmond.

Isabel will be framed once again within a doorway when she disappears into the safety of Gardencourt towards the end of the novel, a scene which in my reading marks Isabel’s attaining spiritual freedom. “But when darkness returned she was free” (636). As Clair Hughes has pointed out, Isabel is the lady in black who contrary to conventions of her day chooses the colour of darkness as her attire. The “child of light”, as Isabel is called, is also simultaneously a child of darkness who defies representation. Surrounded by darkness she vanishes into the house. The spectators are left outside in the dark, and from now on she is no longer visible. “She looked all about her; she listened a little . . .” (636), as it says in the novel. There is no longer anyone who may direct his gaze at her, and there is not even anyone she can hear. “She listens” is an important detail in this context, as sound, according to Sartre, precedes the gaze: hearing someone, especially at one’s back, precedes the experience of being looked at. Isabel no longer sees nor hears anyone, she has successfully escaped representation, she is free. The connections between identity and representation and between identity and sensation are both cut. Her story will no longer be told, she will no longer be seen, will no longer appear as a painting or as a precious object, she finally disappears through the frame she has stood in so often.

This reading of the novel’s ending deviates from other readings; I would like to quote from an example which concentrates on bodily matters, namely on Isabel’s physicality, and the changes Henry James made in his revised 1908 New York edition of the novel: in her essay “Substantive Sexuality: Henry James Constructs Isabel Archer as a Complete Woman in His Revised Version of The Portrait of a Lady”, Bonnie L. Herron claims that “the narrator presents a less emotional and more objectified description of Isabel” and “a sexually more aware Isabel”. This reading is based on a dichotomy between light and darkness, whereby light stands for Isabel’s sexuality. In this reading darkness symbolises her return to a world where she refuses to let the “light” of her sexuality shine. As mentioned above, I read darkness more within a framework of strategies of representation, which leads me
to Isabel exposed to “light” and being very visible as “picture of a
gracious lady” “framed in a gilded doorway” (418), as she is seen by Mr
Rosier at a pivotal point in the middle of the novel. Mr Rosier forces
Isabel into a frame, stabilises her and exposes her to an erotically highly
charged fetishist look. The “gracious lady” poses in Mr Rosier’s view in
a “gilded doorway”, hence establishing to a connection between
“gracious” and “gilded”. Via displacement these ornaments become
something that belongs to Isabel, an inorganic fetish underscoring her
status as an object with high exchange value.

As she stands on thresholds and poses like a picture, Isabel, with her
body as the primary signifier, represents the “idea of an interesting
woman” (74), especially to the maker of this idea, Lord Warburton, who
is one of her suitors and one of her many male beholders. In the same
way that Isabel’s body represents an idea, the fin-de-siècle portraits are
also not literal reproductions of those depicted but strive towards
elevation, conveying an idea of woman conceived by man.

This aspect is clearly linked to one of the key issues of The Portrait
of a Lady, namely the problem whether it is surfaces that represent
one’s self or whether the self is an immaterial entity. I will concentrate
on the problem of surfaces and their value, which will lead to examples
of objectification as found in the novel and the portraits. One of the key
issues in the novel is the question whether objects create a person. This
notion is best articulated in the often-quoted passage in which Madame
Merle tells Isabel that

every human being has his shell and . . . you must take the shell into
account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances.
There’s no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we’re each of us
made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our
“self”? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into
everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again.” (253)

Like spectators in general, Madame Merle has “a great respect for
things” (253) which are the items via which selves define themselves.10

When Isabel is represented as a “picture of a gracious lady” the
“cluster of appurtenances” has closed in on her. The process that leads
to this fixation of Isabel is closely linked to the creation of one’s self via
objectification strategies, which are pursued by all parties involved. On
numerous occasions men regard Isabel as an object, be it as a painting
or as the most precious objet d’art that Osmond manages to add to his
collection. Isabel herself, however, also colludes in these strategies as she actively collaborates in the process of self-objectification.

At the beginning of the novel Isabel goes with Ralph to have a look at Gardencourt's picture gallery. During this walk Ralph turns her into a picture, as he prefers glancing at her to glancing at the pictures: "He lost nothing, in truth, by these wandering glances, for she was better worth looking at than most works of art" (99). What follows is a detailed description of her outward appearance, her body fragmented as Ralph's eyes rest on it. At the same time he adds this body Isabel to his collection. On another occasion, in the Roman palazzo, Lord Warburton "saw nothing but the clear profile of this young lady defined against the dim illumination of the house" (350). This description very much resembles the depictions of women in fin-de-siècle portraits against a very flat background which gives them no room to move.\footnote{11} Again in the picture gallery of Gardencourt during the conversation with Lord Warburton (in response to his proposal which she declines), Isabel presents herself to him as the picture she is soon to become. She does this actively, which foreshadows her future mastery of self-objectification: "Isabel walked to the other side of the gallery and stood there showing him her charming back, her light slim figure, the length of her white neck as she bent her head, and the density of her dark braids" (185).

Seeing Isabel as a picture is a first step towards objectification, seeing Isabel as a precious objet d'art is a second step, increasing her value. The perfect environment for this increase in exchange value is a "cluster of appurtenances", such as can be found surrounding Gilbert Osmond, the novel's most expert collector of precious things. Osmond's rooms tell of "arrangements subtly studied and refinements frankly proclaimed" (279). These arrangements comprise all "those" (as they are deictically referred to in a derogatory tone) "articles of which Italy has long been the not quite exhausted store-house." These objects are appropriated to form tasteful surroundings amidst "modern furniture in which large allowance has been made for the lounging generation" (279). The furniture provided puts people who come and visit in a position to display themselves in the "deep and well padded chairs" (279). The choice of furniture wills bodies into poses, so that they may nicely blend in with all the objects on display.

Osmond himself is the high priest of all these beauties, having fashioned himself according to an old painting. "He had a fine, narrow
extremely modelled and composed face” (280) and “he was a gentleman who studied style” and who “cut his beard in the manner of portraits of the sixteenth century” (280). When Isabel first meets him he appears to her as a perfect objectification, “as fine as one of the drawings in the long gallery above the bridge of the Uffizi.” (298) As a high priest of style, an “abdicated” “prince in disguise” (299), he no longer belongs anywhere specific but has defined himself via his belongings.

Isabel feels an irresistible attraction to objects with a past and thus with an added value. Mrs Touchett’s house in Florence is for Isabel “a shell of the sea of the past. This vague eternal rumour kept her imagination awake” (297). Similar things will happen in Osmond’s museum of things from the past, which all seem to capture Isabel’s imagination. Isabel does not care for the cotton mill of Caspar Goodwood, her American suitor, but she cares for things with a past. Therefore she cares for Osmond’s “faded hangings of damask and tapestry” (279), those items in the “art-culture system”12, which used to be commodities and which have moved up to the status of artefacts. For Isabel everything in Osmond’s villa is “beautiful and precious” (306) and everything in the house is objectified upon first encounter: Osmond’s sister Amy is seen as a bird of fashion, his daughter Pansy as a painting.

In these surroundings issues of value are of utmost importance and therefore Isabel as a woman of independent means holds an attraction for Osmond. When he learns, however, that Isabel has declined a lord she becomes even more eligible: “he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand” (354). Osmond’s decision is preceded by the scene in the Capitol, where Lord Warburton stands in front of the Dying Gladiator and where Isabel contemplates the “noble quietude”, “motionless grace” and “beautiful blank faces” (353) of antique marbles, all qualities which will soon be her own qualities when she will pose, objectified, “motionless”, in the doorframe of the Roman palazzo.

When Ralph meets Isabel in Rome this “beautiful blank face” appears to him as a mask which “completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity13 painted on it; this was not an expression, Ralph said – it was a representation, it was even an advertisement” (443). This passage describing Isabel during her dysfunctional marriage gets close to describing her as a portrait
representing an idea: "what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something" (444). In Ralph’s view it is Osmond that she represents and "the gullible world was in a manner embodied in poor Isabel" (445), and we may add that the "cluster of appurtenances” has closed in on her.

Isabel’s share in the process of objectification is foreseen by Henrietta: “you must often displease others. . . . That doesn’t suit you at all – you’re too fond of admiration, you like to be thought of well. (268). Isabel is keen on producing a “pleasing impression” (88), she wants to represent herself as something special, which becomes obvious when we learn about her: “Isabel had in the depth of her nature an . . . unquenchable desire to please” (88). Pleasing others but particularly pleasing herself will eventually decide her fate. “Live as you like best, and your character will take care of itself” (274), this is Ralph’s advice to Isabel after she has inherited Mr Touchett’s money, and her character does take care of itself: it follows the pleasure principle. Furnished with the money, Isabel “lost herself in a maze of vision” (275), which she mistakes for knowledge, and she falls prey to Osmond’s zeal as a collector and thereby objectifies herself.

Turning to aspects of female visibility in the context of seeing and being seen and to similarities between some Klimt portraits and James’s Portrait, it will be shown that novel and portraits construct active looking as an activity not appropriate for women.

Isabel as a “sight”, as a picture, as a visible woman and one version of the Jamesian New Woman is someone who is constructed as a public sight and a public subject. She does not represent, however, the New Woman who moves freely in public, which is the role assigned to her friend Henrietta Stackpole. Isabel is visible as a sight and objectified as a portrait on display, as a shining fetishised surface, and can therefore easily be turned into an object of male visualisation. Isabel does not conceive herself as a publicly visible woman first and foremost. Objectifying herself as a portrait on display is a second-order strategy in order to turn into a visible woman. In a similar way the women in the Klimt portraits are visible on display, decorating the walls of their semi-public living rooms. The women in the fin-de-siècle portraits employed a similar second-order strategy to become visible at all. Like Isabel they only achieve visibility via their objectification in pictures, banned within the frame of an ornamental two-dimensionality.
In her days in Albany, Isabel is regarded as an “original”, and it is Mr Ludlow, her brother-in-law, who says that what he likes is women who are “translations”, because these are the ones he can fathom. Although Osmond will do all he can to turn Isabel into a translation, she shines as an original, which makes her all the more eligible because of the aura of authenticity she has about her. Isabel, like the ladies in the Klimt portraits, has turned into a work of art which can be valued within the surroundings of an art collection as a singular masterpiece. As a masterpiece she can please herself as well as others as the most valuable item available in terms of artistic achievement.

Another instance of similarity between novel and pictures has to do with eyes and seeing. Henrietta Stackpole, the New Woman who is visible in public and does not embody the “idea of an interesting woman”, possibly because she has no desire to please, which is a prominent feature in Isabel, and possibly also because she is a powerful director of the gaze. Henrietta’s eyes, which are depicted as her most prominent feature, are compared to inanimate objects, when these eyes remind Ralph of “large polished buttons” (138). Looking the way Henrietta does is a male domain, she seems to have no right to the “fixedness” of her eyes, and thus Ralph feels “embarrassed” (138) by this look. Henrietta has shifted position, she is presented as someone who has occupied for herself a spectatorial position reserved for males and is therefore a threat. She has invaded male territory but by dehumanising her eyes as beautiful objects, as “large, polished buttons”, she is made less dangerous. In the course of the novel seeing is construed as a faculty which is dangerous for women.

We find a parallel to this phenomenon in two of the Klimt portraits, *Fritza Riedler* (1906) and *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907), when we consider these women’s highly stylised garments. Many ornamental eyes look at us, outdoing the human eyes in number and intensity. In the portrait of Fritza Riedler her human eyes seem to be strangely dead, looking into a void and not meeting the eyes of the spectators. When we see human eyes and ornamental eyes side by side, the borders between animate and inanimate objects are blurred. Thus the women depicted acquire an added value of precious objects, the eyes are fetishised, which leads us back to surface value vs. depth and sensation vs. representation and the flattening of the body through the “cluster of appurtenances”.
In Osmond’s household Isabel is fashioned as an objet d’art, as a surface upon which ornaments are heaped:

Osmond hated to see his thought reproduced literally – that made it look stale and stupid . . . this lady’s intelligence was to be a silver\textsuperscript{15} plate . . . a plate [and, let me add, a surface] that he could heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become to him a sort of served dessert. He found the silver quality in this perfection in Isabel; he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring. (401)

A similar strategy to be found in the paintings is the blending of the bodies of those depicted into flat ornamental structures. It is a typical feature of the Klimt portraits that the women’s hands and faces stick out as mimetic representations, closely resembling the bodily features of the sitters. Thus in analogy to Deleuze’s model, hands and faces are painted according to the “logic of representation”, as “figuration”. The rest of the bodies, however, is sheer surface, spectacular sensation, non-representational “figure”. The movement of body as depth towards body as surface is a process which, according to Deleuze, involves violence. It is a similar violence which presses the women into the frames of their various portraits, thereby flattening out their bodies as glossy, shiny surfaces, as objects and potential fetishes satisfying male desire.

There is a striking resemblance between Isabel’s self-fashioning and how she is fashioned as an objet d’art, and the way fin-de-siècle ladies were fashioned and were fashioning themselves as portraits. The ladies in the portraits followed a logic of sensation which is similar to Isabel Archer’s self-objectifying strategies, when they clad themselves in ornamental draperies that partly resembled the wall-paper that was depicted behind them.\textsuperscript{16} The bodies of the women represented disappear behind these ornamental draperies. Two-dimensional surfaces are substituted for bodies\textsuperscript{17}, which means, in the words of Madame Merle, too much of the “cluster of appurtenances” has “flown back”.

Like Isabel in her various frames Klimt’s women also let themselves be squeezed into the frames of their portraits where there is not much space left for those depicted. Various strategies of restraint are applied: there is first the frame of the picture itself, which may cut away parts of the body of the depicted. Secondly, ornaments, furniture or rectangles can often be seen within the picture, all elements which mirror frames and which take away women’s space or even visually decapitate them,
as in the portrait of Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein, where a white rectangle cuts through her neck.\textsuperscript{18}

Isabel Archer pays for her desire to please herself and to please others. She has underestimated Osmond's power as a proprietor. Her only way out is to defy representation and "dart" (636) like an animal through darkness. Likewise some of the ladies of \textit{fin-de-siècle} Vienna were not happy with the way they found themselves represented in Gustav Klimt's paintings. Two of them, however, did not resort to darkness and came up with other solutions, which denote new, shifting positions of identity and looking.

One woman who was not keen on her representation by Klimt was Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein, who allegedly altered the painting to her liking; being an accomplished painter herself she re-painted her mouth.\textsuperscript{19} Still, the painting was not put on public display, but was stashed away in the first floor study of the house that her brother, the famous philosopher, built for her together with the architect Paul Engelmann. Another woman who did not like her portrait was the successful co-owner of a fashion house, Emilie Flöge, Klimt's muse. She is depicted posing like a fashion model\textsuperscript{20} in a greenish blue ornamental fantasy dress, which flows along her body like water sparkling in the sun. Emilie Flöge did not even think of "darting" through darkness, but rather chose "light" and another artist for self-representation, namely Dora Kallmus, the proprietor of the photographic studio Madame D'Ora\textsuperscript{21}. Photography also objectifies and fashions those depicted, but as a medium it also represents the visuality of the arbitrary and the visuality of everyday life, which is a visuality very much removed from the highly erotic, fetishised and bodiless women of Klimt’s paintings.

To conclude I would like to hypothesise that Isabel Archer, the "child of light", might have also preferred to have been portrayed by a lady.

Notes
\textsuperscript{2} For \textit{fin-de-siècle} spaces imagined for women by women see the prolific school of Finnish women painters.
Images of frames are a recurring feature of the novel. When the rear view of Gardencourt is introduced we are shown the “extension of a luxurious interior” where the turf is a “wide carpet” (60) and which “was furnished like a room” (61). This “room” is set off by trees whose shade is compared to “velvet curtains”. We look onto a stage, or into a picture. So when Isabel stands in the frame of the doorway she is another picture within a picture.


Isabel’s idea of experience and happiness is closely connected to darkness: “A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can’t see – that’s my idea of happiness” (219).


There is another instance of sound preceding the look in the Capitol encounter with Lord Warburton (see 337).


In The Principles of Psychology (1890. London: Macmillan, 1910, 2 vols.), William James made a similar claim: “a man’s Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friend, his reputation and works, his lands and yacht and bank account” (vol. 1, 291).

Hans Makart, Portrait of Adele Gräfin Waldstein-Wartenberg (1875), Brno, Moravská galerie; Hans Makart, Dame mit Federhut in Rückenansicht (1874/75), Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum; Hans Makart, Portrait of Charlotte Wolter as “Messalina” (1875), Vienna, Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien.


We should not forget that Madame Merle’s Christian name is Serena, which hints at her being the perfect mask.

Both paintings are in the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna.

Similar to the “gilded doorway” and the golden surfaces in the Klimt paintings, this is another example of the construction of precious metal as something that belongs to woman, as an inorganic fetish with high exchange value.

Gustav Klimt, Portrait of Friederike Maria Beer (1916), Tel Aviv, Museum of Art.


Gustav Klimt, Portrait of Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein (1905), Munich, Neue Pinakothek.

Paul Wijdeveld, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Architekt (Amsterdam: Wiese Verlag, 1994) 64.

Gustav Klimt, Portrait of Emilie Flöge (1902), Vienna, Historisches Museum.

Dora Kallmus, Portrait of Emilie Flöge (1909).