Matthew Rhone

Professor Baldassano

Art History I

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A reaction paper and analysis of *Jeanne Cartier* by Francis Luis Mora.



This paper will outline a formal analysis, along with the writer’s reaction to *Jeanne Cartier* painted by Francis Luis Mora in 1916 and 1917. This work was a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Walter C. Crawford, and is currently displayed in the “American Paintings and Sculptures” section of The Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, catalogued as accession number 1969.49. The medium is oil on canvas, and the size is roughly six feet tall by three feet wide. The work depicts a young female, dressed in a style which would currently be considered bohemian. This painting is a naturalistic portrait of Jeanna Cartier, who is a dancer. Cartier is standing on a solid black and slightly reflective floor, and posing in front of a floral backdrop which seems to be a draped fabric. Due to the large size of the painting, and the closeness of the model to the foreground, she is life sized. Mora painted this piece while living in Gaylordsville, Connecticut which is now a neighborhood of New Milford. Mora painted a series of works between 1915 and 1918 depicting actresses and dancers, this is one of three paintings of which Cartier is the model. This painting is said to have helped Cartier earn a role in Cole Porter's first Broadway play, *See America First*.

This piece has two focal points, one is the lower portion of her dress which is iridescent orange, and the other is the pale but luminescent shine of her shoulders and face. These two features are highlighted by the contrasting darkness of the background. The backdrop is a floral print, which is mostly shades of royal blue, darkening as it gets closer to the figure. The dimly lit red flowers of the print compliment the colors of her outfit without drawing the viewer’s attention away from the figure. The floor is sheen black, and the artist added a reflection of her shoes in the floor, possibly to show us that Cartier is standing on a stage, or a dance floor, being that she is a dancer. Although the piece is close to symmetrical, Cartier’s shoulders are tilted down to her right, and her left leg is swept across the front of her body, as if to begin, or end, a casual dance maneuver. This maneuver is also represented by her arm positioning which is slightly outstretched, but close to her hips, hold her fingers outreached and her palms facing backwards, as would be needed for balancing body weight. The positioning of Cartier’s feet are the only indication of depth in this painting, her left foot, with toes pointing outward, is more prominent than her right foot which is in the background at a profile view. Cartier is wearing a one piece dress made up of four different sections, different fabrics, and different colors. The torso section is form fitting, and textured with earth toned green, held onto her shoulders by two thin straps. One strap is orange, matching the lower portion of her dress, and the strap is dark blue, matching the background. The waist section of the dress, also form fitting, is earthen clay orange, and duller than the bottom orange section. It is bordered on the top and bottom with either embroidery or beadwork, separating it visually with the rest of the dress. The lower part of the dress flares out, either by stiffness of the fabric, or the centripetal force of Cartier spinning her hips or torso. This section has a darker patterned red and brown section draped over it, muting the brightness of the orange, and making the whole dress more visually complex. Cartier’s purple stockings complement the orange dress, and stand out under her golden heeled dance shoes. Cartier is wearing a black toreador hat which is placed on a tilted axis atop her head, creating an angular balance with her shoulders. Her large jewelry (earrings, necklace, and right arm cuff) accent her slight stature, and add to the visual complexity just like the patterned portion of her dress does.

Cartier is stunning in this portrait. It’s hard to discern whether the motive for this piece was to capture her style of fashion, or her natural organic beauty. The bright orange would be unpleasantly bright and visually offensive if it wasn’t broken up by the draped red and brown pattern, while her exposed shoulders and arms would be plain and dull if not decorated by the arm cuff and jewelry. There is a good mixture of a professional and casual attitude here with her pose and choice of clothing. We know through the background of the piece that Cartier is a professional dancer, and her pose, fit figure, and confident smile tell us that, however, the multi-colored shoulder straps, bright purple stockings, and prominent jewelry tell us that she has a carefree and fun spirit. When you learn that this piece helped Cartier earn a role in a Cole Porter production on Broadway, it brings an additional appreciation to the work. As a viewer, just about a hundred years after the work was done, the viewer can look at her, and knowing her future, be proud that her confidence and style led to some success. It also creates an often unappreciated link between the visual arts and performing arts, like today’s movie posters and album covers, this painting says a lot about Cartier’s character. It’s difficult not to apply the adage “Don’t judge a book by looking at the cover.” because it was likely important for Cartier to put her best foot forward in showcasing her style and physique. Striking this pose, she casually leans, with delicately outstretched arms and fingers, while literally, putting her foot forward.

The only thing unnatural about this portrait is the lighting. The reflection of her shoes make me think this is a stage setting, which would likely have bright lighting eliminating that shadows behind the model. Although the blackness of the backdrop behind her shoulders does a wonderful job of making her bare skin defined, it seems as if there was either a very complex system of lightwork to shine only on the body, or the artist decided that highlighting the model was more important than the effect of realism.

Cartier's honesty is what drew me to this painting, Her look demonstrates a sense of independence and self-reliance, and although it’s impossible to actually know Cartier, at first glance you seem to know her already. You could confuse this with the type of judgments that are frowned upon normally, but the composition of this piece gives her a very candid appearance. Cartier’s physical balance and open arms are almost saying, “Here I am, this is me.” and inviting us to judge her accordingly. The smile on her face is pleasant, professional, fun, and stern all at the same time, adding a positive touch to her character. Within moments of first viewing this painting, you can’t help but assign human characteristics to Cartier as you think she might be. Discussing it with classmates and museum visitors, you get plenty of statements without deep analysis, such as, “She would be fun to know.” and “I can tell that I would like her, like she is a good person to have in your life.”

The caption in the Yale University Art Gallery catalogue reads:

*“Silhouetted at life size against a curtain backdrop, the vivacious dancer in iridescent costume holds castanets in outstretched arms and wears a toreador hat. The painting reveals Mora’s admiration for full-length portraits by Spanish masters like Velazquez in the vigorous rendering of flattened forms. The faint illusion of three-dimensional space ultimately depends on the pointed placement of her satin shoe in the foreground.”*