

# "Cloth of the Spider:" Deciphering Alfred Stevens' Intriguing "Puzzle Painting," *Young Woman with a Japanese Screen*

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*Young Woman with a Japanese Screen* (Figure 1), a 1989 acquisition of the J.B. Speed Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, has been viewed by thousands of visitors who were unaware of its nature as a complex skein of double entendres, all in French. The provenance of this painting, completed around 1880 by Belgian painter Alfred Stevens (1823-1906), who moved to Paris in 1844, can be traced back to its sale at auction by an anonymous owner in 1940. The beauty of the work is obvious, but what makes the painting unusual is the focus it provides on Stevens' skills as a semiotician.<sup>1</sup> It contains what appears to be a complex visual metaphor: The *femme fatale*, represented as a spider in her web poised to enmesh her victim. This portrayal is crafted through the association of the subject with items suggestive of decadence, and the use of numerous double entendres.

The name of Alfred Emile Léopold Stevens, unlike those of Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh and Georges Seurat, is not a household word today. This is the reverse of the situation a hundred years ago. The latter three, who led lives of comparative misery and struggle for recognition, are now seen as important figures of modern painting and Stevens, the first living artist to be honored by a one-man show at the École de Beaux Arts,<sup>2</sup> is now the relative unknown. At the Paris Exposition of 1867, a remarkable eighteen of Stevens' paintings were displayed. He owned a succession of expensive houses and studios in Paris, each enclosing a fine garden within an urban courtyard. He filled his home with beautiful and exotic furnishings from Louis XIV furniture to fashionable and expensive gowns made for the models he employed in his studio. A typical painting from the high point of Stevens' success might show a woman alone in a room, deliberating over the contents of a letter she has just received, or contemplating an object of art. Among these might be included expensive decorative items such as the carved ivory elephant and the tapestry beneath it in *Le bibelot exotique* (1866),<sup>3</sup> the depiction of whose varied surfaces he used to give his work a breadth of technique. This practice, his sureness as a draftsman, and his fine color sense contributed to his wide success.

Stevens' acclaim was international. First in Belgium, then in France, and finally in America, museums and wealthy collectors clamored for his work. An American critic of 1880 wrote: "The artist is the interpreter of the nineteenth-century woman; he records her graces, her airs, her caprices, her temper, with...infallible and sympathetic acumen...."<sup>4</sup>

Lest it be thought that Stevens was considered a little

unmanly for his absorption in the civilized genre of drawing room interiors, the same critic has this to say: "Alfred Stevens is broad-shouldered, with...the appearance of a cavalry colonel; but the face with its warm brown tint that matches with the hazel eye, the knitted brow...reveal perfectly the man of contemplation and action in one, the man who has lived out his art."<sup>5</sup>

A contemporary artist was moved to say, "Everything depends on the amount of life and passion that an artist knows how to put into his figures. When they live, as Alfred Stevens'... for example, they are really beautiful." These are the words of an unsuccessful but still discriminating artist named Vincent van Gogh, in a letter to his brother Theo.<sup>6</sup>

Stevens' career was linked with that of Edouard Manet. Friends for many years, they shared an early interest in the work of Diego Velázquez, and both were early collectors of Japanese prints and objects of art. Edouard Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* was entitled *The Bath* at its first scandalous hanging in 1863.<sup>7</sup> Alfred Stevens' painting of the same title, of 1867, was more conservative. Stevens' bather was still clothed in her tub. Stevens had reason to be circumspect; his career was proceeding very much to his liking at the time. He was the close friend and perhaps lover of Sarah Bernhardt. Charles Baudelaire sat in Stevens' sumptuous drawing room and read his latest translations of Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>8</sup> Alexandre Dumas  *fils* came to watch him paint. Sarah Bernhardt brought the Prince of Wales to visit. Edgar Degas, a frequent guest at his home, was the godfather of his daughter Caroline. He was friend and associate of Eugène Delacroix, Theodore Rousseau, Cōrot, Courbet, Whistler, and Berthe Morisot.<sup>9</sup> Despite these remarkable circumstances, many people who hear his name today assume the reference is to his British contemporary Alfred Stevens (1817-75), portrait painter and sculptor.

Today Stevens is becoming known again as a "minor Impressionist," a term whose unjust prefix may eventually be removed. There is nothing "minor" about *Young Woman with a Japanese Screen*. Without regard to the "puzzle" aspect of the painting, which will be explained shortly, it is a fully realized masterpiece on the basis of its more conventional characteristics alone. In formal terms it is a compendium of Impressionist elements (Japonisme; a high-keyed palette; a contrast of complementary colors), built upon the framework of totally sound drawing. There is an extra dimension to the painting, however, which has remained hidden from the time of its anonymous sale over fifty years ago. It contains numerous double entendres used to reinforce a complex visual analogy.

Nearly every item in the painting is the object of a visual trope, often risqué. Before enumerating them the simple but essential fact must be noted that these double entendres are effective only in French (as should be expected), and that they are of clear and definitive nature. They establish the three essential images necessary to illustrate the theme of prostitution: "Prostitute," "Pimp," and "Brothel." Each is presented so subtly that, taken individually, they might elude our grasp or be taken as accidental. When placed in conjunction within the limited context of the picture, however, their import is inescapable. They are presented on the screen itself, the nominal defining pictorial element of the work, as the title of the painting tells us.

The first of these visual double entendres lies in the identity of the birds prominently displayed on the Japanese screen. They are cranes, the name for which in French, "grue," is also the French slang word for "prostitute."<sup>10</sup> It should perhaps be noted that Stevens could be expected to be sufficiently familiar with the species which these birds most resemble, *Grus grus*, or the common European crane, to reconstruct it from memory. Stevens was a keen observer, and his older brother Joseph was perhaps the most important European painter of animal subjects at the time. Stevens is known to have engaged in a mock-serious competition with his brother in the depiction of animal subjects.<sup>11</sup>

The second double entendre lies in Stevens' positioning of the crane at left, a male, which stands behind the young woman's right arm. Figuratively, the verb *soutenir*, to support or uphold, means to "stand behind." Its presence in this position is to establish that it is a *souteneur*, or "pimp;" the homonym of the word. This positioning would have no significance singly, of course, and at this point the correspondence between the two concepts, "prostitute" and "pimp" can be viewed as coincidence.

It is when the third of these related concepts is introduced into the confined context of this screen that a pattern emerges. The wonderfully calligraphic streak at the top of the painting is the representation of a meandering river. The third double entendre lies in the fact that the area below the river depicted lies, spatially, at the side of the river. "Riverside" is, in French, *bord de l'eau*, a term whose homonym is as effective in English as it is in French.

These correspondences are sufficiently provocative to warrant a second look. A close examination of the cranes at the right of the Japanese screen reveals that they are engaged in the act of mating. Their proximity, the outstretched wings of the female at right, and the characteristic arch of the neck of the male at left make this apparent to anyone who has observed the mating dash of water birds across the surface of a pond or lake. For those who have not, it should be explained that the windpipe of the male crane is much longer than the neck, and is normally carried looped within the abdomen. In this position it acts as a sound resonating mechanism, an evolutionary adaptation which allows mating water birds to find each other in fog and mist, and accounts for the haunting power of the calls of cranes, loons, *et*

*cetera*. During the act of mating the windpipe extends, forcing the neck back in a seeming parody of human sexual ecstasy.<sup>12</sup> Those who find fault with this observation will nevertheless find it difficult to deny that the birds on the screen are positioned according to their respective roles in the mating ritual: the male emitting his call, and the female in a receptive position.

The problem of intent arises at this point, and the question — "How would one illustrate these concepts if such a program were the objective?" — can be asked. The answer might well involve attaching an identifying double entendre (crane) to the motif of the screen; placing the crane behind the young woman's arm, just as shown; and placing the entire iconographic scheme under an identifying label, "*bord d'eau*."

It is the nature of this type of verbal exercise that it does not translate well from one language to another. It is therefore significant that various permutations of the subjects actually shown on the screen — "crane," "bird," "water bird," "riverside," "stream," etc. — cannot be manipulated in any fashion to reconstruct the central concepts into an English language form. "Bordello" is recognizable, but only because it is a borrowed word. The other half of the equation, its homonym, is meaningless in this context.

Stevens, of course, would not have to use such verbally associative means to introduce the simple theme of prostitution to his painting. The identification of the young woman as a prostitute is in fact incidental to the central theme of the painting: the *femme fatale*. The key to this theme is provided by the pattern of the silk coverlet on the table. At first it is a simple flower design, but Stevens' flowers must never be passed over without notice. Stevens was particularly conscious of the effectiveness of flower themes, and used flowers and their images on various surfaces to reflect the moods and inner qualities of his subjects. "One can judge of the sentiment of an artist," he once wrote, "by the flower he has painted."<sup>13</sup> In this painting his words can be precisely applied.

The surface decorated in this instance is silk, and Stevens has emphasized this fact by a contrast of surface textures. The woven cane surface of the chair back at right shows strong individual strokes whose purpose is to create textural opposition to the silk tablecloth. The contrast of materials points out the thematic note that the young woman is completely surrounded by silk: there is the screen behind her, the silk coverlet, and the elegant gown of raw silk with finished bow of hand painted silk which flows about her. Stevens used a variety of fabrics to cover and decorate his interior arrangements, somewhat in the manner of the old Dutch masters. In some (e.g. *L'Inde à Paris*, c. 1867)<sup>14</sup> the table cover is an oriental carpet. In the similar *Le bibelot exotique*, the cover is a tapestry. *Young Woman with a Japanese Screen*, like some (e.g. *News from Afar*, mid-1860s),<sup>15</sup> shows a silk coverlet, as the sheerness revealed by the fold at the right corner and the sheen of the fabric at the leading edge of the table indicates.

Now we come to the real point of Stevens' use of word play on the Japanese screen. It is to prepare the viewer for a more complex double entendre introduced in his treatment of the

design (Figure 2) on the silk coverlet. Stevens has emphasized the spaces between the petals of the flower, to enhance the flower's resemblance to a giant spider. Once again, the message has not survived the translation to English, and must be explained. "Spider web" in French is *toile d'araignée* ("cloth of the spider"). The young woman, seated casually, is surrounded by yards of expensive silk in the form of her gown. The spider image gives a clue as to why the young woman is virtually swaddled in this fashion. This silken assemblage is figuratively her web; her *toile d'araignée*. Stevens has gone to specifics in order to make sure we understand that this "spider" allusion is intentional. The outer legs, at second look, are not a part of the spider at all; they are the web. Stevens' real spider is poised in her nest in the interior of the "flower." Stevens' reference is to a widespread group of spiders which share similar traits, habits which Stevens would have had an opportunity to observe in any of his fine gardens.<sup>16</sup> The female builds a round web and perches on the interior nest to await her prey, just as shown. To complete the reference Stevens has included the tiny male, at left (the smaller flower) whose hazardous mating ritual is to dash in and impregnate the female at the proper moment, without getting eaten. To assist us in distinguishing these separate elements he has given the web ten strands to differentiate it from the central spider, and has depicted the strands of the web as if drooping in response to the pull of gravity.

While it is not necessary for Stevens to know more of the habits of spiders than an observation of the common garden spider would reveal in order to create this visual analogy, the complexity of verbal connections in the painting is intriguing. One of Stevens' friends of long standing was Alexandre Dumas  *fils*. The world of science was open to Stevens through his relationship with this writer of protean interests. Dumas  *fils* was an important figure at the Académie Française, and one can easily imagine the conversation which might have taken place in Stevens' garden, to lead to the creation of this painting.<sup>17</sup> It would shed light on a cryptic comment which Dumas later wrote to Stevens, upon the publication of Dumas' *La femme de Claude*: "My dear Stevens, we were both painting the monster."<sup>18</sup>

At first this pleasant little painting with its soft and harmonious palette gives no hint of its mysteries. Only the small assemblage of glass, spoon, paper, and string (Figure 3), a group of items not easily explained, stimulates the viewer to probe more deeply into the imagery of the painting. Inherent in this group of objects is a number of more general puns, such as the similar sounding words *verre* (glass) and *vierge* (virgin). The similarity is underpinned by the secondary meaning of the word *vierge* as "blank page," since a blank page is indeed shown in association with the glass. The glass has a chip in its base to show that the play upon words is ironic in intent. This still-life arrangement is the most ingenious of Stevens' word play associations. The page is part of a packet of paper which has been bound with a string (*ficelle*). The French expression for "tricks of the trade" is *ficelles du métier*, or literally "strings of the trade." The assemblage then becomes a minor seminar pointing

out that one of the tricks of the "disastrous woman" (*femme fatale*) is to advance oneself as virginal. By placing an empty glass between this opened "string of tricks" and the viewer the experienced Stevens assures us that this is a transparent ploy.

The message of this assemblage, dependant upon the understanding of a number of generalized puns, would perhaps go unnoticed were it not for their presence within the context of the painting's setting of repeated wordplay. There are other clues to the theme of decadence, however, which are more directly visual. The spoon in the glass, for instance, has a direct reference: the museum exhibits the painting with a card which remarks that the glass has been used for absinthe. More telling is the trio of horizontal stripes of brown which Stevens has so casually placed on the wrist of the young woman's upraised right arm (Figure 4). A close examination reveals that these are imperfectly healed slashes, arranged to tell their own little story: UN . . . DEUX TROIS! There is the initial hesitation mark and then two serious gashes. Stevens has delineated them beneath the cuts by directional strokes of lighter flesh color to highlight them.

The evidence of attempted suicide darkens the theme. There is a latent strength in the figure, yet the expression of this strength may not be entirely wholesome in intent. The entasis of the young woman's outstretched left forearm is well defined, and the muscle tone is good. Stevens reinforces this gesture by the thrust of the female crane's neck, for it is important. He uses it to portray his spider waiting with deceptive languor, her left hand grasping the fabric of her web, alert to the slightest touch. Stevens has depicted her only visible fingernail, that of the thumb, totally straight across at the base, emerging from the thumb like the claw of an animal. The idea is strengthened by the use, in French, of the same word, *ongle*, for both nail and claw. The single pupil visible in her shadowed eyes, the left, is elliptical, like that of a cat, a second allusion to animal vitality. Stevens evidently respected the strength of this woman, regardless of what his other feelings might have been. The mixture of tragedy and wordplay approaches the macabre, but regardless of the intellectual detachment implicit in the frequent play upon words, there is an undeniable warmth and vitality in the handling of the painted surface.

One senses from the beauty of this painting that it could hardly be the vehicle of expression of a specific animus; but rather that Stevens felt a sympathetic affection for this challenging young woman. The marks of dissolution are displayed with detachment, while the subject is treated with sensuous warmth. The blend of distance and involvement, a mixture of concern and disapproval, is consistent with the view of a dissolute lifestyle which a worldly and sophisticated man might be expected to possess. One feels that in any event Stevens was affected, consciously or otherwise, by the poignancy of the young woman's sorrowful past more strongly than he cared to admit; a testament to the underlying potency of the central theme. It is in this sense of authentic emotional involvement, as opposed to a mere manipulation of the stylish parade of poses struck by so many of his subjects, that *Young Woman with a*

*Japanese Screen* occupies a unique niche in the work of Alfred Stevens.

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- <sup>1</sup> Two earlier Stevens paintings, *The Letter of Announcement* (1862) and *The Cheval-glass* (1871) serve as comparisons. The first contains a painting-within-a-painting showing a figure described as the allegory of painting (William A. Coles, *Alfred Stevens* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum, 1977] 13) holding a mirror. In the 1871 painting Stevens uses a clutter of personal objects in the room to create a portrait of the artist in his absence (Coles 41). Although a complex painting, this latter work features many objects whose significance would be known only to the artist and his acquaintances. In this sense *Young Woman with a Japanese Screen*, which demonstrates the ability of art to simultaneously conceal and reveal its meaning, occupies a singular position within the body of Stevens' work in its degree of complexity in dealing with the allegory of painting. (The book cited above is a catalogue of a major exhibition of Stevens' work held at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, September 1-October 16, 1977. It is the definitive work on Alfred Stevens at the moment).
- <sup>2</sup> Diane Heilenman, "Two Acquisitions Enhance Speed's Impressionist Collection," *The Courier-Journal*, (Louisville, Kentucky: The Louisville Courier-Journal, Dec. 31, 1989) I, 6.
- <sup>3</sup> Now in the Shickman Gallery in New York. Coles 41.
- <sup>4</sup> Earl Shinn, *The Art Treasures of America*, vol. 1, Philadelphia: G. Barrie, 1880, 30.
- <sup>5</sup> Shinn 31.
- <sup>6</sup> In a letter to Theo. *Insight* (Louisville: J.B. Speed Art Museum, n.d.) 7. From Vincent van Gogh's *Complete Letters* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1959).
- <sup>7</sup> R. H. Wilenski, *Modern French Painters* (New York: Vintage, 1860) 27. Critic Arthur Stevens, younger brother of Alfred, defended Manet in the press.

<sup>8</sup> Philippe Jullian, *Montmartre*. (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977) 38. Although it would be pertinent to investigate the relationship of Stevens' work, particularly *Young Woman with a Japanese Screen*, to the artists of the Symbolist group, this paper is necessarily too brief a vehicle for such a discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Coles xi.

<sup>10</sup> For this key observation I am indebted to Dr. Dario A. Covi, University of Louisville Allen R. Hite Professor.

<sup>11</sup> Coles 9.

<sup>12</sup> The African Crested Crane, or *Anthropoides virgo*, is perhaps named in ironic reference to this evocative correspondence.

<sup>13</sup> Alfred Stevens, *Impressions of Painting* (New York: J.W. Bouton, 1886) 11.

<sup>14</sup> Coles 31.

<sup>15</sup> Now in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore. Coles 27.

<sup>16</sup> The largest of these species is the silk spider, or *Nephila*, found in the New World tropics. Both the Nephilids and a more extensive group, the Argiopes, spin large, radial-armed webs and sit in the middle to await prey. (Thanks are due to novelist Graham K. Watkins, who numbers among his accomplishments an MA degree in Biological Science at Duke University.)

<sup>17</sup> In this regard the timing of Edgar Degas' series of monotypes depicting prostitutes on display in their brothels, done 1879-80, is also suggestive. Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Janson *19th-Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984) 375.

<sup>18</sup> Coles 37.



Figure 1. Alfred Emile Leopold Stevens, *Young Woman with a Japanese Screen*, c.1880, oil on canvas, 23 1/2" x 20", J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky.



Figure 2. Alfred Emile Leopold Stevens, *Young Woman with a Japanese Screen* (detail: silk coverlet on table), c. 1880, oil on canvas, 23 1/2" x 20", J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky.

Figure 3. [right] Alfred Emile Leopold Stevens, *Young Woman with a Japanese Screen* (detail: assemblage of glass, paper, and string), c. 1880, oil on canvas, 23 1/2" x 20", J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky.



Figure 4. [below] Alfred Emile Leopold Stevens, *Young Woman with a Japanese Screen* (detail: marks on wrist), c. 1880, oil on canvas, 23 1/2" x 20", J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky.

