Introduction

Although the study of the human figure and mastery of its representation were central to art making as early as the fifteenth century in Europe, in nineteenth-century Paris the artist’s model became identified as a distinct social type and cultural trope. By the end of the nineteenth century the model was typically assumed in the popular imagination to be female and frequently characterized as sexually available. Through much of the twentieth century, posing for the nude stood for the practices of modeling tout court, and the relationship between artist and model was assumed to be sexual as well as professional. This stereotype deviates, however, from the model who figured in academic theory and practice at the start of the nineteenth century: this model was male and his identity off the model stand was immaterial. According to academic theory, as initially formulated in fifteenth-century Italy and as institutionalized in the pedagogy of the École des Beaux-Arts and the hierarchies of genre of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, the idealized male nude figure – the beau idéal – embodied the noblest human qualities. But no individual model could represent the ideal, since no particular human was free from bodily idiosyncrasies. Thus within academic practice the model served to mediate between the antique ideal and an imperfect nature and counted for little himself.

This book proposes to examine the artist’s model in France between 1830 and 1870, the period when the academic model was displaced in studio praxis and modern stereotypes of the model emerged. It is conceived as incorporating three histories: a social history of the men and women who posed in nineteenth-century ateliers, a cultural history of stereotypes of artists’ models, and an art history which examines how the social history of models intersected with artistic practice and how stereotypes of models were incorporated into artists’ self-fashionings. In weaving together these strands, I have been guided less by the imposition of a theoretical paradigm than by the intent to keep the figure of the model at the center of this study.

Typically ‘models’ are defined as those paid to assume a pose at the artist’s direction, rather than those who sit to an artist whom they pay to produce a portrait likeness. The differentiation derives from atelier praxis shaped by the traditional academic hierarchy of genres: artists who created
multi-figured history paintings commonly relied on paid models – *modèles de profession* – while portraitists were paid by their sitters. Even when the academic paradigm prevailed, posing was not a *métier* shaped by institutional frameworks: there was no school in which models trained, no guild that delimited them as a collective body. Nevertheless, I will argue that in nineteenth-century Paris there was a coherent social structure, a network of rules and customs that shaped the praxis of the pose.¹ This constellation of social conventions and institutional regulations affected not only the pose itself, but also the gender of the model, whether or not a model posed nude, how a model solicited work, and how and how much models were paid, among other particulars. As social history, this study, then, investigates the array of routines that comprised modeling as an occupation.

This study focuses on both the social identity of models and what I call ‘the artist/model transaction.’² Academic theory assumed that an artwork embodies the artist’s idea, a cerebral reworking of the model’s material presence. In this paradigm the role of a live model posing for a history painting is comparable to that of an apple represented in a still life, and viewers were instructed to attend to the moral lessons delineated in the narrative rather than the physical bodies through which they were represented. More recently, however, feminist art historians have focused on the gender of bodies represented to argue that images of women serve to regulate the female body and establish social norms of femininity. In this paradigm, images of female models have served to assert the male artist’s virility and contributed to the masculinization of artistic production.³ Reframing the encounter between artist and model in terms of social patterns of gender, this insight has tended to reinforce the modernist equation of ‘the artist’s model’ with women who posed. It has also, however, placed the artist/model relationship in a context that extends beyond the studio. As a social practice, the pose was an extended exchange between artist and model; although the performance of the pose took place most immediately on the model stand, its dynamic could assume different trajectories. By dubbing the artist/model association a ‘transaction’ I hope to draw attention to the reciprocal aspects of the artistic production.

As cultural history, this study will examine stereotypes of the model circulating in nineteenth-century France.⁴ ‘The model’ existed not only as a set of historical personalities – the men and women who made their livings on the model stand – but in public discourse as a set of invented stereotypes. With the emergence of mass media and particularly the panorama literature during the July Monarchy, ‘the model’ became a figure in the public imagination. Outside the *atelier*, on the streets of Paris, a model’s profession was not immediately apparent, but because models were drawn from groups with more visible identifying characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity, they came to be defined in these terms. Particular traits were attributed to sub-categories of models, establishing a series of stereotypes: the male model, the female model, the Jewish model and the Italian model. Though these took shape primarily in the popular visual culture, they also figured in high
art representations. In examining the stereotypes, I suggest that they served in the popular imagination as a focus for anxieties about changes in the modern urban population. Each stereotype was also identified with a particular genre of painting: the male model with history painting as fostered by the pedagogy of the École des Beaux-Arts, the female model with the ‘display nude’ at the Salon, and the Italian model with Italianate genre painting. The stereotypes of the artist’s model that emerged in popular discourses provided, I would propose, a schema through which the high art paintings for which they posed might be understood.

In order to differentiate the various types of models – both historical and stereotypical – I employ some terms which were employed in nineteenth-century discourse – *modèle*, *modèle occasionnel* – and I introduce others that, although they were not made use of in the nineteenth century, did – I would argue – figure in the popular imagination: *modèle* (lorette), *modèle* (juive). Some, of course, will argue that without a word there is no mental construct – that in the absence of a signifier there is no signified. I propose here that the discourse surrounding the profession indeed suggests otherwise, but to signal my neologisms, I have introduced parentheses.

This usage is also intended to address the awkward linguistic fact that in the French language the noun *modèle* is of masculine gender. A *modèle* was a man. A woman who posed was known as a *modèle de femme*: literally ‘a model of a woman.’ Because of this, it was difficult to distinguish models by both gender and ethnicity. Thus, for example, I use the construction *modèle* (juive) to incorporate the double issues of gender and ethnicity which were embodied in the stereotype of ‘a Jewess who poses.’

Since the stereotypes emerged in popular culture, much of the book focuses on caricatures and texts that appeared in journals and the emergent mass media rather than the elite cultural production that is the traditional purview of art history. Although popular visual culture has been of growing interest to scholars of nineteenth-century art, art historians often privilege either elite or popular visual culture. Since both popular and elite culture contributed to the formation of stereotypes of the model, I here attempt to attend to the intricate interchanges between the two discourses, privileging neither.

The chronological parameters of the book and its organization have been shaped by the stereotypes in popular discourse. The emergence of the stereotypes marks my starting point, but since they evolved out of and were shaped in part by *atelier* praxis, in the initial chapters I extend a retrospective look at the prevailing practices in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The study concludes with the end of the Second Empire. Although the more tenacious of the stereotypes persisted well beyond 1870 and into the twentieth century – if not the twenty-first – in the Third Republic the displacement of academic structures by the dealer/critic system and the eventual repeal of censorship laws transformed the conditions in which the stereotypes functioned.

By privileging the stereotype, I hope to shift attention away from the bodies of particular models to the collective body of models, the *métier*. For a
similar reason, the stereotypes are interrogated by reading them against both atelier practices and the histories of the social groups associated with the stereotypes. Investigating the larger societal transformations which contributed to a particular group’s emergence within the métier proves especially useful in contextualizing stereotypes of ethnic models. The intention here is not to debunk the stereotype by establishing the ‘true’ identity of, for instance, Italian or Jewish models. Rather it is to elucidate the artist/model transaction as a professional practice within the social patterns of nineteenth-century Paris and to underscore the varied functions that the stereotypes served within the popular imagination.

Although I prefer to privilege the métier rather than particular models, the stereotypes are also read against biographies of selected individuals. These ‘case studies’ are intended to offset the essentializing nature of stereotypes by presenting the models’ lived experience.⁵ They also serve to present models not simply as the passive objects of the gaze of artists and caricaturists, but as active participants in the artist/model transaction. They focus on models’ agency in managing their own careers and negotiating the social practices of the métier and the prevailing stereotypes. I have deliberately avoided, however, devoting much attention to those models – such as Victorine Meurent – who have figured largely in past accounts of models. Most of the models whose biographies are incorporated, such as Charles Alix Dubosc or Maria Pasqua, will probably be familiar only to specialists in nineteenth-century French art. It is my hope that by enlarging the cast of characters within the discourse on models this study will contribute to elucidating the social patterns of which they formed a part.

None of the biographical accounts on which I rely, unfortunately, was written by an actual model. Although autobiographical accounts would serve most readily to highlight their agency, most models seem to have been marginally literate at best. It is only at the close of the century that models began to write their own histories. The earlier biographies that have survived were written by friends, descendants, or, in some cases, journalists who were eager to capitalize on the more colorful aspects of the emergent stereotypes. These narratives must be read with caution, especially those written by observers who were not particularly close to the model, for they are often shaped by and perpetuate the stereotypes. Even in biographies, the life of the model is often presented as a series of anecdotes of the sort that have been dismissed by scholars as colorful but inconsequential trivia that have little bearing on substantive readings of the works of art that are the true object of disciplinary inquiry.⁶ In the aggregate, however, these anecdotes can be seen as part of the pattern that comprises the stereotype. With the pattern established, it is also possible to discern how individual incidents deviate from the stereotype and how it was negotiated and deployed by the models themselves.

Finally, as art history, I address the intersection of the social history of models and studio praxis. The population of men and women seeking employment in Parisian ateliers changed dramatically in the July Monarchy
because of larger shifts in the urban population. More importantly, stereotypes of the model emerged at a moment when the academic hegemony of artistic institutions and traditional studio practices was being challenged and the artist’s public persona was increasingly shaped as much by the press as by official awards. It is my contention that while the artist/model transaction took place within the confines of the studio, it resonated beyond the studio when artworks were seen at exhibition. Salon critics and audiences recognized stereotypical models in the works on view. Stereotypes of models became signs that could be mobilized by artists to distinguish their artistic identities and practices within the increasingly competitive arena of French art. I argue that in their self-fashionings – both visual and textual – artists deployed the familiar stereotypes to differentiate their own personas and praxis before the press and the public.

Ultimately, I hope this volume will suggest new ways that the artist/model transaction may be understood and will contribute to a re-examination of the function of the model in artistic production. Further, I hope that it will serve to refocus art-historical attention on the model in a manner that moves beyond the stereotype that prevailed in modernist discourse.