

Women in the Salons

Bonnie S. Anderson and
Judith P. Zinsser

Denis Sherman
Western Civilization: Sources,
Images and Interpretations.
Boston: McGraw Hill, 1995.

... Parisian women established the institution of the salon by the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Aspiring hostesses competed to attract the talented, the witty, and the powerful to their homes. Outside the powerful French court and frequently in opposition to it, these new social circles offered women a new possibility: that of being a salonière, who by her graciousness and skill enabled conversation to flourish, artists to find patrons, and aristocrats to be amused. As a salonière, a woman brought the circles of power into her home. In the environment she created, she could help or hinder not only artistic and literary reputations, but political policies as well. The financial remedies for France's economy were debated in the salons; the king's choices of ministers were strongly influenced by the backing of powerful salonières. Salonières were privy to court secrets; salons were frequented by statesmen and ambassadors as well as intellectuals and artists. Salonières could make or break careers and often provided havens for new political philosophies and the new political opposition to the monarchy. . . .

In the salon, a woman could meet and marry a man of superior social rank or wealth. In the salon, a woman of enterprise could make her way by attracting the famous. The salon became the base of influential women who swayed kings, governments, political opinion, and literary and artistic taste. . . .

Rational conversation, sociability between women and men, delight in the pleasures of this world are the hallmarks of Enlightenment culture. The men who mingled with the Bluestockings and frequented the salons were the men who produced the Enlightenment. It is a tragedy for women that these men, who were aided, sponsored, and lionized by the salonières, produced—with very few exceptions—art and writing which either ignored women completely or upheld the most traditional views of womanhood. Just as there was no Renaissance or Scientific Revolution for women, in the sense that the goals and ideals of those movements were perceived as applicable only to men, so there was no Enlightenment for women. Enlightenment thinkers questioned all the traditional limits on men—and indeed challenged the validity of tradition itself. They championed the rights of commoners, the rights of citizens, the rights of slaves, Jews, Indians, and children, but not those of women. Instead, often at great cost to their own logic and rationality, they continued to reaffirm the most ancient inherited traditions about women: that they were inferior to men in the crucial faculties of reason and ethics and so should be subordinated to men. In philosophy and in art, men of the Enlightenment upheld the traditional ideal of woman: silent, obedient, subservient, modest, and chaste. The salonière—witty, independent, powerful, well-read, and sometimes libertine—was condemned and mocked. A few Enlightenment thinkers did question and even reject subordinating traditions about women. But those who argued for a larger role for women—like the Englishwoman Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the French Marquis de Condorcet in his *Admission of Women to Civic Rights* (1790), the German Theodor von Hippel in his *On the Civic Improvement of Women* (1792), the Spaniard Josefa Amar y Borbón in her *Discourse in Defense of Women's Talent and Their Capacity for Government and Other Positions Held by Men* (1786)—prompted outrage and then were forgotten. Instead, most philosophers and writers reiterated the most limiting traditions of European culture regarding women, often in works which condemned traditional behavior for men.