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Gender Roles During Colonial Industrialization: Isaac Israëls' *Coffee Sorters*

Isaac Israëls was a Dutch painter active in the later 19th and early 20th century, most commonly associated with the Amsterdam Impressionist school. The son of prominent painter Jozef Israëls, Isaac was introduced to painting at a young age and was fascinated with the Impressionist practice of capturing passing moments in time.¹ Known for also portraying individuals of varying classes pertaining to a specific industry, his 1886 painting *The Coffee Sorters* (Fig. 1) depicts working class women sorting coffee beans inside a factory in Amsterdam. This practice allowed Israëls to communicate an encompassing image that informs and articulates the viewer of historical and emotional context within the workforce. Although it shows a moment of everyday life, the work is an important example of the intersection between gender roles, industrialization, and colonial structures that permeated the rapidly growing Netherlands at the time.

There is a minimal amount of information about Israëls and his paintings, albeit a decent amount of documentation about his practices and influences to produce this work. The son of an eminent leader of the realist Hague School, the artist was introduced to painting at a young age and went on several international trips with his father to the Dutch East Indies and United Kingdom. An advocate of the flâneur practice, Israëls spent a large portion of life studying and documenting different occupations within a specific industry, whether it be the Amsterdam fashion houses or the diverse range of employees in the hospitals throughout the Netherlands. *The Coffee Sorters* serves as a brief window into the workers' environment and their attached emotions, merging their internal feelings with the tumultuous and chaotic factory that surrounds

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them. The artist was heavily influenced by the Tachtigers, a Dutch writing circle, that insisted that the style of an artwork must coincide with the emotional brevity of it, no matter how it may distort or manipulate the actual conditions. Through combining his knowledge of the Dutch colonial system through his travels, hereditary learned painting techniques, and Impressionist ideals Israëls amalgamates the observed emotions and aura of the scene to warp a factory setting into a representation of the cultural conditions and events that have caused the pictured passing moment to occur.

One of the first observations of *The Coffee Sorters* is that the paintings contains only female subjects, as the women are lined up along receding, long tables to the wall of the building. This is one of the first Dutch art works to depict women in a working, manual setting and emits a sense of success in exchange for a different variety of suppression. Until the 19th century, the orthodox Calvinist, and then Dutch Reformed majority suppressed women's rights and suffrage and women were positioned in the traditional, domestic role at home. After it's break with Belgium in 1831, and the gradual industrialization of the country foddered by its colonies and growing trade, the Netherlands were socially split between the socialist, secular working class and the distinguished, conservative upper class. The solidification of the social classes, as well as their values, created a schism that was strengthened by the technological advances in the region.

Increasing social pressure, along with the abdication of William I in favor of his son, eventually socially permitted women to enter the working force. As *The Coffee Sorters* portrays, working conditions in the industrialized age were dehumanizing and brutal. In exchange for release from the domestic sphere, Dutch women were placed in the most undesirable jobs, such as maids, seamstresses, and finally the portrayed coffee sorter, whose employment was relevant

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for the short amount of time before being replaced by machinery. Israëls reflects the uncomfortable, seemingly unsure future of the workers through his Impressionist style, encouraged by the Tachtigers, that muddles and disturbs the natural, realistic image with the exhausted, despondent emotions of the workers.

A scene of possible emancipation and freedom is contradicted by the dismal, ominous atmosphere. Social change and working equality is traded for a scene that is consigned, contributing to a beguiling structure completely apart from the women and their aspirations. Women's inclusion in the system is communicated as an ill-timed setback for the sex as whole, as their poor quality of life and grueling task seems unattractive compared to the docile domestic sphere. In historical context, the workers have been bureaucratically tricked into the industrial apparatus that the country gains its wealth from and are visibly suffering consequentially.

The tumultuous relationship between the figures and their surroundings continue in Israëls' choice of representation of the womens' clothing. Workers are almost entirely seen in dark, cloth dresses that are stained and spotted with numerous blemishes and smears. Dark planes of their dresses are accentuated by airy, translucent blues and greens that provide an aura over their solid black forms. Subjects are visibly weighed down against the table, a reflection of the emotional and physical burden they carry. Flesh tones of women's faces and hands are also highlighted by the dark tones in the piece, but are unable to provide more information due to the intentional neglect of detail in their faces. These stylistic choices impart the artist's interpretation of the ill-lit, congested factory and the burdened workers inside of it. Imperfections and distortion of weight in the subjects and the environment unite to communicate the conditions and stresses of working in the factory. The discernable stress seen in the partitioned, encumbered

clothing of the women further develops their deceived situation and leads to questions about other social responsibilities associated with them.

The Coffee Sorters is a poignant instance of Dutch women's history for what it neglects to show, just as much for what is visible. Evidently, women's paramount role shortly before this work was that of a mother and homemaker. In 1886, the newly united Netherlands lacked any regulation for centralized education or overtime compensation. Apart from their working conditions, what situation were the children of the pictured workers in? There were nominal opportunities of schooling for working class children, and it is only assumed that their offspring either worked in factories themselves or were left to their own devices. There were no child labor laws either, and the work communicates that not only are the present Dutch victim to the conditions of labor, but the future of the country as well.

The focal point of the painting is naturally the product of the workers, the Javan coffee beans that are shipped in from the colonies to be processed and redistributed throughout Europe. Mounds of beans are heaped on the table, depicted as being condensed and solidified into pressured mounds. They separate the women from each other across the table, forming a divisive ridge that stretches backwards away from the viewer. Being an exotic commodity, it is the result of a colonial system of oppression that the work only divulges a portion of. The Dutch coffee industry is a fleeting phenomenon unique to this time period and work, and it begs the consideration of the process that allowed *The Coffee Sorters* to occur. Through an administration of manipulation and subjugation not unlike the environment Israëls captured, goods were sourced from the Dutch East Indies back to ports of Amsterdam.

Up until the 1860s, the East Indies dominated the coffee trade as the largest supplier to the European upper classes, and eventually the general population. A system was put in place in

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Indonesia known as “forced planting” where a portion of a farmer’s crop must be devoted to exportation. A highly exploitive relationship grew out of this stature, as the value of the beans exponentially increased as soon as they arrived in Europe. To enforce this policy, Javanese villagers were formally linked to their village, sometimes quarantined to a certain area to discourage evasion. A faux currency was even minted by the Dutch and traded with the indigenous workers for the beans, whose value far surpassed the depreciated value of the copper coins they were given. There were also several famines, specifically in central Java, that were a byproduct of the prioritization of coffee over rice. The East Indies quickly became practically a monocrop, and at it’s height over twenty percent of annual coffee production was exported to the Netherlands.

This systematic abuse and depredation of the Indonesian people and their livelihood, as well as lasting damage to their developmental capacity, serves as a parallel to the social plight of the Dutch women and shows that the colonial structures in place at the time were not endemic, but rather suppressed groups from multiple locations throughout the world. The Indonesians’ optimal hope of sharing the technological and societal advances of their metropole was instead manipulated and misused, leaving the Dutch as the sole benefactor. Through this form of imperialism, a dependency on the Netherlands destroyed the traditional fabric of their society and created an unequal demesne that was retained throughout the century. The female laborers in *The Coffee Sorters*’ future is no different, as their hope for a shift in status and opportunity is extinguished by the conditions they contribute to and are condensed into the lower class in a stratifying country.

Through the factors that allow and reserve the coffee bean trade, as well as the Netherland’s prosperity, to occur there is an aperture for examination into the capitalist

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acceleration that accompanied the colonial parasitism and rapid industrialization of the Western world. Israëls' work exemplifies a momentary example of the results of this relationship, both in terms of humanity and the physical product that is exchanged for the degradation of the former. Rather than focusing on the retinal impression of the moment, the emotional brevity of the space caused by these conditions manipulates the perception of the viewer and physical attributes of the piece. Industrialization of the world around the working class women is a palpable influence in their devolved, beaten state as *The Coffee Sorters* serves a consequence to the developing city around them.

After the Netherlands officially gained independence after the 1839 London Conference, the newly united northern provinces saw a respectable, consistent growth fueled by the development of land and prioritization of industry. Stimulated by the increase in global trade, cash crops, and opportunity of banking practices such as seigniorage in the Dutch East Indies and marginally South America, the area around Amsterdam and the Hague was transformed into a sprawling, manufacturing hub. The populated coast gradually transformed from an agrarian focus to labor-intensive manufacturing. This was a relatively quick change in lifestyle and workload for the Dutch working class, who exchanged fluctuating harvest cycles for consistent, arduous days inside factories. Provincial villagers who enjoyed a degree of independence were now funneled into the production hubs along the ports of the region. This process consolidated the cumulative mindset and values of the Dutch working class, as well as their mistreatment by the burgeoning industrialized system.

The Coffee Sorters serves as an analysis of the psyche of the average manual worker in the Netherlands at that specific moment in time, showing the stark contrast in situations between the subjects and past generations. Respectable, predilected work is traded for detached

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production lines that leave no room for personality or volition. In the piece, women are portrayed with smoothed, separated definitions of their bodies and obscured identities under flesh-toned blots of impasto. Their immediate expressions are skewed and hidden from the viewer, relying on their exhausted postures and stylistic choices to communicate emotion. Israëls' interpretation of the industrial environment holds an immense gravity that suffocates and compresses around the women, creating a claustrophobic and hemmed environment. The intentional negligence of identifying the women has a strong connection to their atmosphere, which dehumanizes and deprives them of agency or individual value.

Unlike observations of the technological and commercial advances of the time in artworks, *The Coffee Sorters* lacks any representation of mechanical invention. The lack of a mechanism is instead replaced with the function of the combined workforce. Human subjects in the factory are instead collectivized themselves, coalesced into a contrivance with a singular message. Women are pressed shoulder to shoulder in a sequence, embodying the friction and linearity of a string of cogs unitarily working for a given task. This mechanization and alienation further develops the theme of the deprivation of free-will and opportunity to a resigned fate as a specific function in a solitary task. Israëls' choice of dissociation highlights the effect of the industrialized experience that seeks to simplify consciousness in exchange for an acceleration in production.

By manipulating the association to the women and their environment, and imparting a sense of a subjugating, choking environment, Israëls is able to impart the physical strain and discomfort of working in a Dutch factory in the 19th century. The corporeal connection between the materials and figures in the piece are altered and purposefully left abstract to twist the viewer's perception of the piece's contents, but the psychological and spiritual relationship is left

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to be communicative and felt by the viewer. The task that the work is titled for is relatively unimportant like the mundane, tedious job it is; but the effect it has on it's workers and their aspirations is a clarifying glance into the living standards of a specific, marginalized group.

Isaac Israëls' *The Coffee Sorters* distorts the physical representation of the women and their attachment to their surroundings, giving insight into the specific experience and condition they are submitted to, in result of events that are uncontrollable by the subjects. By accentuating certain aspects, such as the table and coffee beans and the dark gathering of clothing, and minimizing certain aspects, such as the direct emotions and identities of the workers, structural and contextual answers are left arguable and confusing. The environment and palpable strain of labor alters the rational perception to create a hallucinatory, Cimmerian environment that smothers the figures pictured. Derealization of a tenuous scene is further complicated by the historical context of the colonial trade that allowed this work to be observed, as it's context is understood to be another event in an overall exploitative process. Completed towards the turn of the century, the frame of womans' suffrage and social rights is muffled in a setting that not only removes feminine aspiration as well as individual agency. Appreciated information that is unknown includes the future livelihood of the laborers, as working regulation and womens' enfranchisement were passed within decades of the work's completion. Initially a scene of quotidian labor, *The Coffee Sorters* is a convergence of the results of industrialization, colonial structures, and genders roles that provides context of the developing Netherlands.

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