

# Comparative Study

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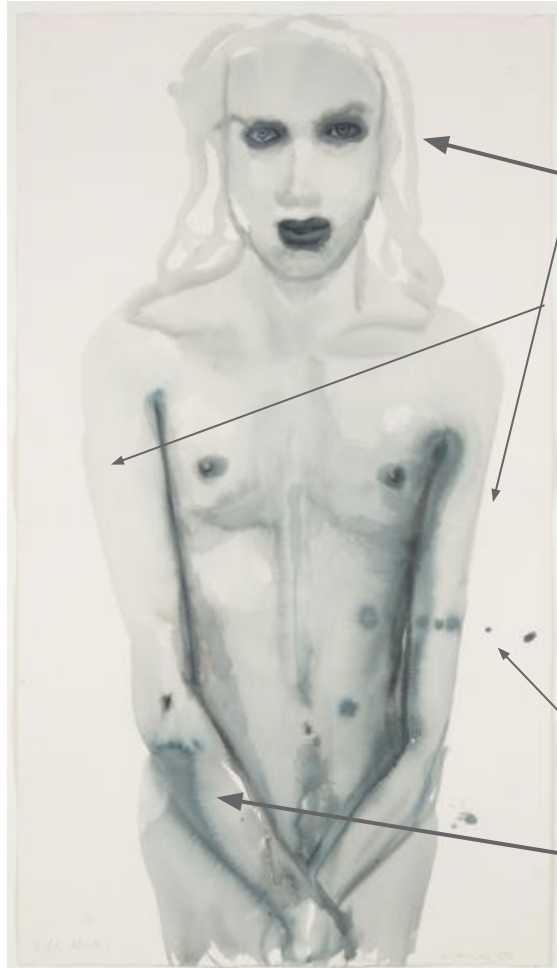
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The goal of my comparative study is to compare and contrast Marlene Dumas's "Light Blonde", and William Merritt Chase's "Still Life with Fish" and "Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park". I have viewed all but "Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park" in real time. I will also be identifying and explaining the cultural significance, function and purpose of these works. Specifically, I will be looking at how the positioning and colors of these works convey the meaning that the artist intends and what this intention is.

# Light Blonde by Marlene Dumas-Formal Qualities

The white, washed out background emphasizes the darker areas of color on the form that is centered in the page. Though the only color is blue, the expression of the figure is intense, and does not seem to be sad or uncomfortable, even though the placement of the limbs convey a feeling of discomfort. The variety of values Dumas uses create the impression of the texture of human skin. Due to the connectivity of the form with lines and with a fade of color towards the edges, the piece seems to be more unified, and the form is not entirely separate from the negative space around it.



The difference in proportions-mainly in the head and arms areas, creates feelings of tension and unbalance.

**Light Blonde Marlene Dumas**\_(South African, active Netherlands, born 1953) 1996 Watercolor and ink on handmade paper 57 5/16 × 34 5/16 × 1 1/4 in. (145.6 × 87.2 × 3.2 cm.) 2016.20

The dots of paint also make the figure seem more connected with the negative space around it, and give the appearance of shapes on the “skin”, which could be bruises or simply discolored areas.

# Interpretation of function and purpose



The purpose of all of Dumas' paintings is to confront the viewer with her view of the world and her interpretation of the experiences of people, in other words, to be viewed. This purpose directly links to the function, which is to make people question what they believe and feel, as well as giving the artist some "staying power" due to its ambiguity. Marlene says often that the reason that she decides to portray the people that she does, the way she does is to provide a visual commentary on her own and their experiences. She is bringing attention to the situations occurring around the world in such a way as to seem aggressive, confrontational, and disturbing, forcing the viewer to think about the world and their position in it.

Broken White, 2006 Oil on canvas, 130 x 110 cm Courtesy Gallery Koyanagi © Marlene Dumas Photograph by Peter Cox, © 2015, ProLitteris, Zurich



Marlene Dumas The Painter, 1994 Oil on canvas, 200 x 100 cm The Museum of Modern Art, New York, fractional and promised gift of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg © Marlene Dumas Photograph by Peter Cox © 2015, ProLitteris, Zurich

Some clues that can be visually seen in this piece and a few of her others is her chosen color scheme, which often leans towards blues and greens for skin, which gives the subjects a sickly pallor. This aspect causes me, as well as other people to give the form a different connotation, one that is perhaps more violent than the original story, or could be a version that seems more child-friendly, all depending upon the color palette she uses.

Because Dumas' works are paintings, often there will be assumptions as to the subject, which often will be proven to not be the case in her work. When one looks at the works that she has created, the subject is often ambiguous and unclear, while also haunting with the color palette and discoloration of otherwise realistic subjects.

# Interpretation of function and purpose

Many of Dumas's paintings are created with oil paints, which gives a more defined and solid shapes, unlike the one that I chose, which is watercolor and ink on handmade paper. The ink creates more defined lines such as would be seen with oil paints, while the watercolor adds more of a faded, transparent look to the focus than other works, which signals a change in the aspect of the human experience that Dumas is attempting to portray to the viewer. Each aspect of the paintings is specifically chosen to portray Dumas's intentions and push the humanity and discomfort of their situation into alternate realities and perspectives.



*The Kiss*,  
2003  
Marlene Dumas  
Oil on canvas  
15 7/10  
× 19  
7/10 in  
40 × 50  
cm

**Light Blonde  
Marlene  
Dumas**  
(South  
African, active  
Netherlands,  
born 1953)  
1996  
Watercolor  
and ink on  
handmade  
paper 57 5/16  
× 34 5/16 × 1  
1/4 in. (145.6  
× 87.2 × 3.2  
cm.) 2016.20



# Evaluation of cultural significance



Marlene Dumas **Wall Wailing 2009** Oil on canvas 70 7/8 x 118 1/8" (180 x 300 cm) Gift of the Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg Family Foundation 388.2010 © 2016 Marlene Dumas

These works are of the wall of Jerusalem, which caused many to call out in outrage that she would convey the troubles of the world in such a way as to paint the world as far from perfect for anyone, especially those that she portrays. She rejects these claims, saying that she is not attempting to make her own life seem worse than it is, but is only showing her view of the world. This is also portrayed by the series that her work "light blonde" is a part of, which portrays male prostitutes that she asked to do a photoshoot and interview, says Laura Burkhalter.

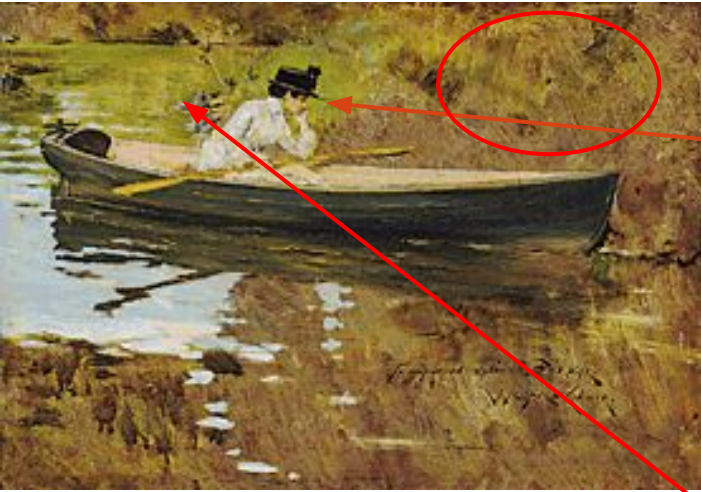
According to Dumas herself, she has attempted to depict the negative aspects of Apartheid, as well as other negative aspects of people's real experiences in such a way as to elicit ambiguous feelings and thoughts in the viewer. This, as she says, is where the lasting power will be, not in other aspects of her works.

Her art teacher in college in the Netherlands suggested that she stick with painting, which is what she was good at, even though the others in her class were experimenting with many different and new mediums, which she wished to do as well. But with the urgings of her teacher, she stayed in painting, and therefore branched out to other aspects of society to find new and innovative areas of focus. Many of her works are based on pictures, instead of open air, which allows her to interpret and work through the details that she wishes to use to convey her concept.

*Marlene Dumas, 'The Wall' (2009), oil on linen, 180 x 300 cm, Gayle and Paul Stoffel collection | Photo Peter Cox, Courtesy Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and Marlene Dumas.*



# Comparisons and Connections



**Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park** William Merritt Chase (American, Williamsburg, Indiana 1849–1916 New York) 1886 Oil on panel 13 3/4 x 19 5/8 in. (34.9 x 49.9 cm) Paintings Gift of Chester Dale, 1963 63.138.2

**Light Blonde** Marlene Dumas (South African, active Netherlands, born 1953) 1996 Watercolor and ink on handmade paper 57 5/16 x 34 5/16 x 1 1/4 in. (145.6 x 87.2 x 3.2 cm.) 2016.20

Both paintings depict human beings as their subject, with similar colors for their forms. Marlene Dumas' "Light Blonde" is more confrontational in manner, as the subject is looking directly out of the paper, while in Chase's work, the subject is looking at the water, away from the audience, some distance away. This shows some of the influences of their different experiences due to the places they have visited as well as the different times that they have lived in. Chase depicts an entire scene, with context and realistic forms, if slightly blurred by the distance, near picture quality, painted in plein-air. Dumas' work seems to be posed to elicit feelings from the viewer, and is less realistic in nature, as the color palette is extremely limited—there is only one color, and many of the lines that would define the edge of positive space with negative space are blurred and less defined.

Chase uses oils, which can be layered as well as blended, and cover the support almost completely, while Dumas uses watercolor for "Light Blonde", which is useful for creating indefinite lines and an ethereal quality and does not completely cover the support if used lightly, as Dumas does.

# ***Still Life with Fish* by William Merritt Chase-** **Formal Qualities**

The dark brown/black background contrasts with the bright pot, plate, and the largest fish, which then helps to obscure the other forms of fish, which are closer in color to the background, as well as smaller. This difference in colors also depicts the light source, which is from the front and slightly to the left. This adds even more emphasis on the silver fish and decorative pot behind it.



The longer the audience looks at it, the more forms of fish that become apparent, causing movement that draws in the audience. The largest form, next to the pot, draws the eye immediately, thereby causing the discovery of more forms of fish the longer the viewer is able to look at it, without the distraction of the largest forms.

**Still Life with Fish** William Merritt Chase\_(American, 1849 - 1916) c. 1908 oil on canvas 29 x 36 1/8 in. (73.7 x 91.8 cm.) Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Gift of Florence L. Carpenter, 1941.9

# Interpretation of Function and Purpose

The fact that the casual viewer who only glances at this will most likely see the large fish, take a second look, read the title, and assumes that that one fish is the only one that is depicted, which is then ready to be proven wrong again and again, causes the piece to become more interesting as time passes and the viewer continues looking. This is a very effective way of catching and keeping the viewer's attention. Capturing the audience's attention then means that they will most likely speculate on why he decided to put these forms in, leading to the questioning by the audience as to what the meaning is, and reflecting on their assumptions quietly.

This also allows "Still life with Fish" to be interesting visually no matter the number of times that it is seen, which means that it has the power to continue to make viewers inspect it, even after over a century and many viewings. This may be the result of his style, where it was said that he would paint such still lifes as demonstrations for his students and other spectators.



**Still Life with Fish**  
**William Merritt Chase** (American, 1849 - 1916) c. 1908  
oil on canvas 29 x 36 1/8 in. (73.7 x 91.8 cm.) Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Gift of Florence L. Carpenter, 1941.9

When asked about this work, Linda Burkhalter said that it was very interesting and that it would be interesting and worthwhile to look at what the symbolism and significance of still-lives are. She has most likely seen "still life with Fish" hundreds of times, yet it is still interesting and significant.



# Interpretation of Function and Purpose

The purpose of this piece is also to be viewed, however in the “polite society” of the time, which may have changed how William Merritt Chase portrayed his concept. Additionally, because of the style of the painting—a still life, there are expectations that the viewer tends to have towards what will and will not be depicted. This may have been a contributing factor to Chase’s portrayal, which subtly challenges the traditional means of portraying still-life, such as de Heem’s work, “Vase of Flowers”. The expectation of the viewer for a still life is that it portrays inanimate objects that give account of what kind of life the



Still Life With  
Fish  
William Merritt  
Chase  
29 x 36 ⅛ in.  
(73.7 x 91.8 cm.)  
Des Moines Art  
Center  
Permanent  
Collections, Gift  
of Florence L  
Carpenter,  
1941.9



Jan Davidsz de  
Heem, Dutch,  
1606–1683/1684,  
Vase of Flowers, c.  
1660, oil on canvas,  
69.6 x 56.5  
(27 3/8 x 22 1/4), National  
Gallery of Art,  
Washington, Andrew  
W. Mellon Fund 95

However, in this piece and the series of pieces under the same name, Chase gives an interesting dichotomy between the traditional still-life and his work, as well as life and death, by painting the form of fresh fish bodies, which would go bad quickly, constraining his time, as well giving the impression of recently ended movement. This is often a common theme of still lifes, but what makes William Merritt Chase’s “Still life With Fish” special is the detailing and color of the fish, which are vibrant in hue, causing them to seem nearly alive, juxtaposed with a dark background color, which would generally have meant a darker meaning.

# Evaluation of Cultural Significance



**Still Life with Fish** ca. 1910 William Merritt Chase

Oil on canvas 28.5 x 41.5 in., 72.39 x 105.41 cm. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John McGuigan and Museum Purchase, the J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for American Art 2000.84

He is considered by many to be one of the best American Contemporary Artists of his time. Due to his fascination with the “old masters” in Europe, he traveled there, mastered the techniques and mediums that they used, then brought them back to New York, putting his own spin on them through experimentation. He was known to give demonstrations of his style in his class by going to the fish market, buying several, painting a still life with them, then returning them before they went bad. People were fascinated by his expressive and large brushstrokes, which then would blend together to make extremely life-like paintings, which seem to jump off the canvas, even though the fish were painted as inanimate, dead objects.

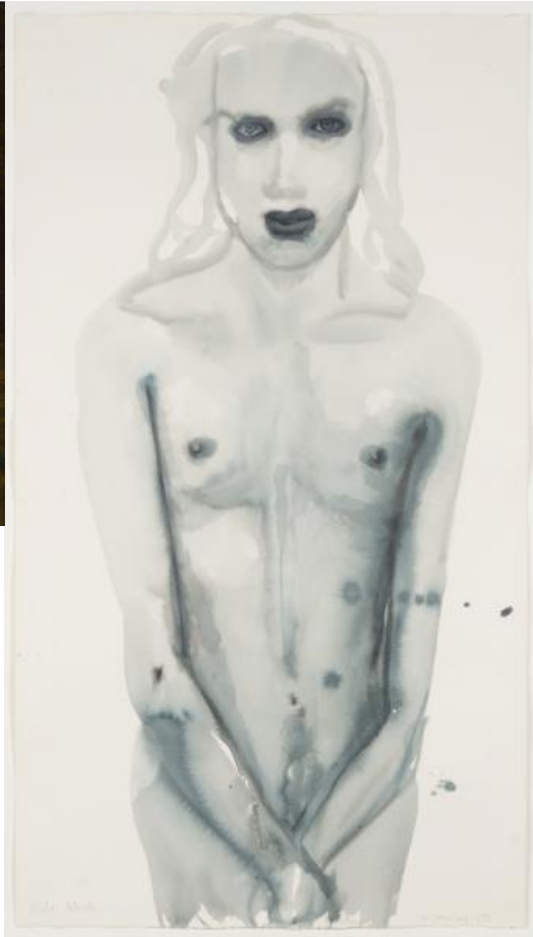
This continues to seem to be true, even after a century, accomplished through the use of shorter brush strokes and use of lighting to make the figures seem as though they are about to move. The cultural significance of this work is that it causes the viewer to question their assumptions, which allows them to become more mindful of them in the future.

# Comparisons and connections



**Still Life with Fish William Merritt Chase**  
(American, 1849 - 1916) c. 1908 oil on canvas 29 x 36 1/8 in. (73.7 x 91.8 cm.) Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Gift of Florence L. Carpenter, 1941.9

**Light Blonde Marlene Dumas** (South African, active Netherlands, born 1953) 1996 Watercolor and ink on handmade paper 57 5/16 x 34 5/16 x 1 1/4 in. (145.6 x 87.2 x 3.2 cm.) 2016.20



These paintings depict surprising and often disturbing ideas and question the assumptions of the audience as to what the concept is, and challenge what is expected from paintings in the respective styles.

Dumas' "light Blonde" is highly confrontational, shocking the viewer with the starkness of the idea that she is portraying- that there are still harsh experiences that ought to not be ignored, such as prostitution (the issue addressed in "Light Blonde", which can be understood on at least some level by the viewer, even if they are unfamiliar with her work and concept, due to the directness of "Light Blonde", depicting the androgynous figure in the nude.

William Merritt Chase's "Still life with fish" is much more subtle in its confrontation of the assumptions of the viewer, depicting the forms of dead fish as inanimate objects-not living things, but as inedible as the other objects, and just as dead, yet somehow alive and beautiful.

# ***Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park-William Merritt Chase-Formal Qualities***

The form of the woman on a boat does not appear to be moving, based on the relative absence of lines representing ripples in the water, the paddles being in a resting position, and the fact that this was painted in the moment in about half an hour. The time it would have taken means that it is difficult to paint a moving focus. However, because of a contrast of colors on the water with a very specific pattern and rhythm, the rest of the forms and shapes in this painting seem to be moving around the main focus-the form of the woman on a boat. The limited color palette unifies all of the areas of the work, with an emphasis on the form of the woman and the area which is portrayed as the reflection of the sky, which are the only two areas that have a different color palette, in the water, depicting the reflection of the sky, and the lady's dress, which is similar in color to the sky.



**Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park** William Merritt Chase (American, Williamsburg, Indiana 1849–1916 New York) 1886 Oil on panel 13 3/4 x 19 5/8 in. (34.9 x 49.9 cm) Paintings Gift of Chester Dale, 1963 63.138.2

# Interpretation of Function and Purpose



## **Mrs. Chase in**

### **Prospect Park**

William Merritt Chase (American, Williamsburg, Indiana

1849–1916 New York) 1886 Oil on panel 13 3/4 x 19 5/8 in. (34.9 x 49.9 cm)

Paintings Gift of Chester Dale, 1963 63.138.2

William Merritt Chase, Lydia Field Emmett, 1892. Oil on canvas, 72 x 36 1/8 in. Brooklyn Museum, New York, Gift of the artist



The function of this work was to be seen by others, which then leads the function towards insinuating the feelings and comments the artist had at the time on their subject. In this specific work, there is a subtle masculine feeling to the pose of the figure of the woman, who is looking away from the audience, serene and unmoving in a rowboat, which she would have had to row to the spot by herself, and seems to be looking at something hidden from view. This has a traditional, old feeling to it, while also subtly depicting a strong woman with no relation to anyone else, and not in the assumed pose of being protected from the sun by a parasol, which would have been very traditional, but would most likely not have portrayed the personality of the person as Chase would have preferred. Something similar is depicted in his work, "Lydia Field Emmet"l, who was one of his students who later went on to become famous in her own right, seen in a pose that was once reserved for men, yet still managing to appear to be ultra-feminine through the use of darker background paired with a dark dress, emphasizing the pink streamers and white lace, as well as the relatively low-cut back.

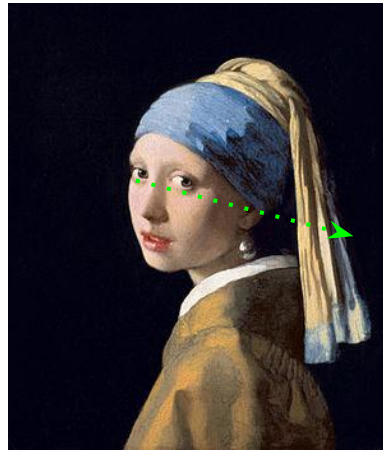
# Evaluation of Cultural Significance



**Johannes Cornelisz. Verspronck (Haarlem circa 1606-1662), Portrait of a gentleman, three-quarter-length, in black costume with a white lace collar and a black hat, oil on canvas, 81.6 x 68.2cm (32 1/8 x 26 7/8in).**

Photo: Bonhams

Girl with a pearl earring  
Johannes Vermeer c. 1665  
Oil on canvas  
17.5 x 15 in (44.5 x 39 cm.)



William Merritt Chase taught for years, and was a member of the Tile Club, effectively pushing the American movement towards plein-air paintings. He was a key contributor to the American take on French Impressionism. Though he studied the more old-fashioned methods, he would often change the technique and subject to be more modern, such as giving modern-at the time, women positions in portraits that were often reserved for men in the older fashions when he was painting their portrait. He wished to make distinctly American Art that was both sophisticated and part of a cosmopolitan environment. Traditionally, male portraits would have more commanding stances and direct gazes, while women were often not looking directly at the viewer, instead looking towards the viewer from the side. However, this would not be as possible to do with a plein-air painting, such as “Mrs Chase in prospect park” as it would not be practical. Therefore, the concept is much more subtle than his portrait of Lydia Field Emmett. It seems as though another factor in Chase’s different portrayals of the two women has something to do with the different personalities that they had, which also would have been a new concept, as there are traditionally only a few portrait poses to choose from, and personality was mostly ignored.

William Merritt Chase painted commanding women with direct gazes, such as a man would do, when posing them inside a studio which was something that was known to be a more American idea, where the women were direct and authoritative while also enticing, as portrayed by the “follow me lad” streamers of pink. The significance of this is that he challenged the assumption that women would be aware of being watched but submissive, which takes a different form in his work “Mrs Chase in Prospect Park, but is just as effective.



William Merritt Chase,  
Lydia Field Emmett, 1892.  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 36 1/8  
in. Brooklyn Museum,  
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# Comparisons and connections



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William Merritt Chase (American, Williamsburg, Indiana 1849–1916 New York) 1886 Oil on panel 13 3/4 x 19 5/8 in. (34.9 x 49.9 cm) Paintings Gift of Chester Dale, 1963 63.138.2

**Still Life with Fish William Merritt Chase** (American, 1849 - 1916) c. 1908 oil on canvas 29 x 36 1/8 in. (73.7 x 91.8 cm.) Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Gift of Florence L. Carpenter, 1941.9



Both of these works were done quickly, as the situation in which they were painted required. “Mrs Chase in Prospect Park” was done in the plein-aire style, which meant that this was painted at the spot depicted, and meant that it had to be done quickly, or the scene would change, as everything within the scene could move at any time. In comparison, while “Still Life with Fish” is a still life, which traditionally have been something that was not time constrained, there are recently bought fish that are being painted, which meant that it had to be done before they went bad. William Merritt Chase would often paint this kind of still life as a demonstration for people and students to see, whereas plein-aire was often much more solitary, as it was an outside activity.