The Art of Conversation

Enter some beautiful salons where women gather to discuss what's important—the essence of life.

BY CLAUDIA STRASSER

Jean François de Troy (Paris 1679 - Rome 1752), ***Reading from Molière*** around 1728, Oil on canvas, 72.4 x 90.8 cm; Collection late Marchioness of Cholmondeley, Houghton. Source: Wikipedia.

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Opposite:

Top:

In an elegant apartment, the door swings open to a room perfectly designed for entertaining. Amid candlelight and evening air, colorful guests begin to arrive at the Salon, excited by what the night will hold in store. The scene is a 400-year old Paris aerie—a place to gather and discuss literature and the arts—and the hostess graciously welcomes her honored friends. She's setting the stage for an evening of joy and laughter, as well as a passionate discourse on serious issues concerning daily life that will change history.

This is a scene from centuries ago, yet its roots have become part of our own culture. We refer to a gathering as a "modern-day salon," but where does that term originate? It's a wonderful and colorful story, written by a group of women who have come to be known as Salon Hostesses.

The Golden Age of Salons evolved over two centuries as these women, (also called salonnières), brought together writers, philosophers and entertainers to discuss events of the day. Ironically, what was discussed was not as important to the group as the way it was discussed. In fact, in the early salons, the primary goal of the gatherings was simply to distinguish socially appropriate conversation. It's hard to believe, especially in our own age of texts and quick e-mails, that the greatest thinkers of the day would come together for nothing more than mere conversation and that, in turn, for a brief moment in history, conversation would become the great art of the time—no less important, real and influential as music, art or sculpture.

It took place at a time when great architecture, literature and social and scientific developments were the rage. Yet although these topics were passionately discussed, the main topics of debate focused mainly on the merits of love, courtship, the nature and essence of man and woman. Through talking, convers-

ing cleverly and oh-so-politely, they created social customs, re-wrote politics and courtesy, and changed the social climate at a time when these topics were closed to women. What emerged was a new world for both sexes that spurned an era of opening minds and changing hearts in France: The Age of Enlightenment.

So just how did early salon hostesses elevate entertaining to an art that would become the epitome of French life and create an ideal lifestyle that we still consider the height of refinement today?

Chambre Bleu & La Préciosité

Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet in Paris, was the hostess of the most famous literary salon in France, and innovator of what evolved into the modern salon. The early 1600s was a time as miserable as it was beautiful. While the charms and beauty of Paris couldn't be denied, it was eclipsed by the behavior of its citizens, the men particular. Filth and force were the modus operandi, and men's philosophies were reflected in their strength and brutality. Tired of being disrespected at court and living in what she considered uncivilized society, de Vivonne yearned to better her world and did something unprecedented: She left the court of Louis XIII to cultivate a simple, more refined life on her own with her daughter and called their home Hôtel de Rambouillet.

Her goal was to raise women from their status as uneducated property to thought-provoking, literate and civilized people by asking society to question virtually all of its perceptions and practices. Maybe it was not a simple goal, but it was achieved in a simple and unexpected way: through nurturing the spoken word, heightening it and formally developing conversation into an art. Her efforts formed a surprising movement that through salons taught society a way of conduct, giving them parameters, both socially and intellectually, that spread from the world of the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie.

Madame moved from the Louvre and the unsophisticated mayhem of the court to a manse nearby. She renovated by creating a suite of adjoining rooms. Each was an open

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reception room leading guests into in her sanctum sanctorum, the famous Chambre Bleu. Here she took to studying social culture and the relationships between men and women. She was mainly concerned with a couple's courtship, ways to woo a woman and appropriate methods for a man to address and flirt with them, mainly through genteel behavior and having a quick, witty, and humble tongue. She became famous for encouraging the art of conversation in a playful and clever setting by inviting the most prominent thinkers of the time to her gatherings.

Days were filled with games and artistic delights, including masked balls, singing and, of course, extensive discourses. Together, enlightened socialites, artists and great thinkers of the day, turned new phrases, created colloquialisms and reworded obvious and mundane into words of bliss. Sometimes notes were taken and made into plays or re-read aloud. Almost all of the guests' discussions were on courtly love and virtue, and the group composed rhymes and played with words, all the while enjoying clever conversation, trying to turn the most ordinary words into expressions of refinement and referring themselves as Le Préciosité.

For almost 50 years, the salon was known as a place where ladies could be free from the constraints of men and the obligations of marriage. They were, in fact, able to create a place of elegance and manners, where proper language would flourish. Her success came from teaming the brilliant minds of unlikely guests, great writers and thinkers—from Moliere, the most cutting writer of the day, to the controversial and risqué Ninon de Lenclos. The colorful and enlightening discussions were for many of the women, their entire education.

But as they became more and more involved in the minute details and excessive politeness of the spoken word, the direction of the discussions became formal to the point of absurdity, and they were eventually considered pretentious. The spell was broken when the group fell victim to Molière's biting pen as he wrote Les Précieuses Ridicules, a play that satirized them and their desire for perfection in conduct and love, making them suddenly look silly and superficial.

As with all good things, each ends and another is born, and from these gatherings many other powerful salonnières evolved, including that of Madame de Maintenon, Mademoiselle de Montpensier and Madame de Scudery. Each had her own following and inner circle, and created a host of new salons focusing on the literary, philosophical, political, scientific and cultural issues that were emerging. A new era of the Salon provided the great minds a forum to eventually usher in the Age of Enlightenment.

Now in the 1700s, Salons could focus on economics, literature, art and music, adding deeper and deeper layers to a society that was developing as the best spoken and thought-provoking that the world had ever known.

The hostesses and their traditions continued and the salons grew through the early part of the 20th century. Each had a personal style and became more and more a part of the culture. Modern salons as we know them were sources for intellectual debates and a place to find great minds throughout history. Even into to the '20s, salons were still places to share meals, read aloud, perform theatrics, play music, dance and ultimately, converse. And the social atmosphere was still defined by the art of conversation. The appreciation of a witty verbal banter continued to transcend the difficulties of the day and propelled guests into the height of amusement for the love of conversation and nothing more.

Salons were born from a love of fun, a basic human need for communication and respect. Yet it was serious kind of fun, and one that's difficult to pinpoint because conversation is impossible to recapture. There is no real way to recount the playful friendships and debates, and we'll never know just what went on behind the doors.

We can imagine the guests who played and improvised, delivering great one-liners sparking laughter and eloquent remarks over a meal, and the magical connections that were made in a shared moment in time. Though the words are long gone now, in those connections was the heart of the salons. The history of the salon is a magical one that is kept alive by its mystique. As we ponder the powerful conversations that may have been, our only sure knowledge is that it changed history and tradition forever, creating a society of ladies and gentleman who understood one another for the first time.

The traditional salons of long ago are gone forever but live on with each of us. Their spirit is deliciously renewed each time we thoughtfully engage in the most basic yet most complex of human of rituals: The art of good conversation.

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