Women in Art and Literature Networks:

Spinning Webs

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CHAPTER SIX

LA CHAÎNE DES DAMES:
A WOMAN ARTIST NETWORKING IN PARIS
IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Gabrielle Réval’s booklet *La Chaîne des dames*, published in Paris in 1924, sketches the portraits of sixteen interconnected, intellectual, artistic and largely feminist women in Paris during the Belle Époque and the interwar period (fig. 1). Among them, the Belgian-French artist Yvonne Serruys (Menen (B.), 1873-Paris (Fr.), 1953), on whose networking this article focuses. As the author of some forty paintings and nearly two hundred sculptures, Serruys was not a “spider in the web” of social network analysis theory, but certainly an interesting “node” with many “ties”, based on kinship, friendship, sisterhood, etc. Her network, geographically situated mainly in Paris, could be divided somewhat artificially into strong family ties, a male-dominated artists network (especially in sculpture, then being considered a male artistic preserve), male and female intellectuals and writers, and a feminist women’s

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network, with obvious links between these. Using selected facts and hypotheses, objects and anecdotes, this case study aims to partly trace the network of this particular artist, focusing especially on some influential women within it. It will reveal a wider network in which art, literature and feminism were central, and will try to understand the functioning of this network and the opportunities it gave ambitious upper or middle-class women artists in early 20th-century Paris so far as it not only defined their social lives, but also contributed to their professional careers.

Yvonne, Emile & Daniel

Yvonne Serruys’ first important network was created in late-19th-century Belgium, where she grew up, in an art-loving upper middle-class family near the French border (her father being at the head of a textile factory in Tourcoing, northern-France), and was trained, first of all by the influential luminist painter Emile Claus (1849-1924). He was a close friend of her parents, who bought at least one of his paintings. Yvonne received her first lessons from him as a teenager, and he must have been a strong early influence. She was further trained by the neo-impressionist Brussels painter Georges Lemmen, who portrayed Serruys’ two younger sisters, Berthe and Jenny, in Menen (double portrait now in the Indianapolis Museum of Art), and later by the Brussels sculptor Egide Rombaux, who portrayed the wife of Yvonne’s brother Daniel (1874-1950) in marble (now in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels). Yvonne went back to her first tutor Claus, who had two other female pupils, who became members of his artists’ association “Vie et Lumière” (1904-1911). Claus also introduced Serruys to the Paris art scene. He often stayed in the capital for long periods and developed a proper network there. At Serruys’ first exhibition at the Paris Salon in 1898, Claus was a member of the jury. In her opinion, he was influential, too, in the acceptation of one of her paintings: “It’s kind of you to have telegraphed about the Champ de Mars result. Thank you very much. I am also sure that you have, under the circumstances, done everything you could for me and I am deeply and sincerely grateful to you for it.” He was not part of the

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2 Letter from Maria Serruys to Emile Claus, 9 February 1893, in Dossier Emile Claus, Brussels, Archief voor Hendendaagse Kunst van België (AHKB).
3 Letter from Yvonne Serruys to Emile Claus, February/March 1898. Dossier Emile Claus, Brussels, op.cit. The translations from the French are the author’s.
jury in 1899, when she had again one painting accepted, but Serruys believed he might have used his influence behind the scenes after all.4

At Claus’ death in 1924, Serruys obtained the commission for his monument in Ghent through his widow and the Belgian connections that she maintained, although she had settled in Paris around 1900. In 1909, she returned briefly to her birthplace, Menen, where her parents still lived and where she would realise the war memorial in 1921, to marry. Her best man, her younger brother Daniel, had been the first family member to move to Paris in 1897, and after the wedding, their retired parents and youngest sister Jenny would follow. It seems that this family network (the family included five children) remained strong and influential for the rest of Yvonne’s personal and professional life in Paris. Daniel, a classical philologist, in whose company Yvonne visited Italy, seems to have been instrumental in introducing his sister to his well-to-do Parisian network of intellectuals and writers, and stimulating her career from the start, such as her first solo exhibition in the Paris gallery Barbazanges in 1898. Following Daniel’s death in 1950, Yvonne wrote about her entourage: “[...] the word genius is obviously too strong, nevertheless, I have lived in the midst of people each of them remarkable in his own field”.5 In the 1920s, she described her stimulating milieu in Paris as one of intellectuals, professors and artists.6

After living for a while on Avenue de l’Opéra in 1899, Boulevard du Montparnasse (1903) and rue de Bagneux (now called rue Jean Ferrandi), Yvonne Serruys and her husband Pierre Mille, a renowned French colonial

4 “Mon frère Daniel étant à Rome avec tous nos amis j’ai dû attendre le ‘papier officiel’ pour avoir des nouvelles du Champ-de-Mars. On a accepté la boutique et remballé les autres. J’avais bien pensé qu’on me renverrait tout: vous n’étiez plus là, il n’y avait dans le Jury ni Cottet ni aucun de ses amis, et c’était fort chanceux… puisque vous êtes un peu sorcier vous avez pour sûr trouvé moyen d’agir à distance et je suis convaincue que je vous dois encore cette petite joie là… Je vous en suis reconnaissante de tout mon cœur.”, letter from Yvonne Serruys to Emile Claus, “jeudi soir” 1899, 1-2, in Dossier Emile Claus, op.cit. Her “boutique” was exhibited at the Paris Salon (nr. 1322) as Intérieur pauvre.


6 “Mais vous pensez du mal de Paris, et je veux vous chercher querelle. On sait que Paris est un creuset, on dit que c’est un cloaque; pour moi c’est une fausse sceptique (sic). Pour juger la vie saine de Paris il faudra que vous connaissiez les milieux de savants, de professeurs, d’artistes [...]”, letter from Yvonne Serruys to Arthur Pellegrin, 3 March 1926, La Garde, private archive.
writer, diplomat and journalist, moved towards the end of 1912 or the start of 1913 to 15 Quai de Bourbon, on the Île Saint-Louis. That tranquil island in the middle of Paris was favoured by artists and writers. Yvonne’s parents and her sister Jenny had already taken up residence there in 1910, on the other side of the river, on the Quai de Béthune. The large seventeenth-century building at numbers 13-15, called Hôtel Le Charron, once housed the studio of Ernest Meissonnier, and in 1912 accommodated several artists, at least three painters and a sculptor. The Armenian dancer, actress, writer and translator Armen Ohanian, born Sophia Pirboudaghian, who was inspired by Isadora Duncan’s “free dance”, settled in the attic of the building in 1913-1914. Ohanian was the inspiration for Serruys’ bas-relief triptych showing a graceful and scarcely veiled woman in successive dance poses (plaster, Menen, Stadsmuseum). At that time, Ohanian became the lover of the painter and writer Emile Bernard, for whom 15 Quai de Bourbon would become his last address. In 1932, Bernard painted the portrait of Yvonne Serruys, who was five years younger than him (he annotated it “to Mme Serruys, sculptor and friend”, oil on canvas, Menen, Stadsmuseum, fig.2), and mentioned the couple Mille-Serruys under fictional names in his novel La Danseuse persane (1928), based on Armen Ohanian.

**Yvonne & Camille**

On the ground floor of the adjacent Hôtel de Jassaud, 19 Quai de Bourbon, lived the nine-years-older sculptor Camille Claudel (1864-1943). She had moved in there in January 1899 and would stay until her

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7 At the same address, 15 Quai de Bourbon, were recorded in 1912 the painters Paul Aubin, Mme Inès de Beaufond (member of the Société des Artistes Français), Louis Delfosse (member of the Société du Salon d’Automne, where Yvonne Serruys had presided the sculpture jury the year before), and sculptor L. Flandrin, “Officier d’Académie”, who is elsewhere in the annuaire (under “adresses commerciales”) also mentioned under “Cheminées en bois sculpté”, with twice the same telephone number mentioned. (Annuaire de la curiosité et des beaux-arts, Paris-Départements-Étranger (Paris, 1912), 88, 330, 345, 404) Possibly, Serruys moved into this sculpture studio later that year. However, in the 1913 Annuaire both Flandrin and Serruys are mentioned at 15 Quai de Bourbon. In the 1912 Annuaire, Serruys was still mentioned under the address of 5 rue de Bagneux.

8 A memorial plaque on the building recalls Bernard’s stay in the building. Ohanian also refers to Serruys and Pierre Mille (but without their names) in her memoirs Les Rires d’une charmeuse des serpents (1931). The couple apparently also intervened to solve a money conflict between Bernard and Ohanian after their breakup. (With thanks to Dr. Vartan Matiossian for the information on Ohanian.)
internment, on 10 March 1913. Camille Claudel and Yvonne Serruys were thus neighbours for some months or weeks and certainly no strangers to each other. Claudel was not in the best condition by then, but she remained a much-discussed personality in Paris. Serruys knew her work and admired her achievements, as she later told an interviewer: “Since Camille Claudel, sculpture is indebted to women for works of a high human quality and undeniable skill”. The two sculptors had already repeatedly displayed their works at the same venues in earlier years. They both belonged to the relatively small, but since the mid-nineteenth century, steadily increasing group of women sculptors in Paris, among them the Duchesse d’Uzès (pseudonym Manuela), Charlotte Besnard, Laure Coutan-Montorgueil, Marguerite Syamour, Blanche Moria and Jeanne Itasse, to name but a few.

These sculptors did not form a particular women’s network, rather the opposite: they mostly tried to succeed on their own and stand alongside their male colleagues. Serruys too would take part in the Paris Salon every year, as well as in others elsewhere, always among a majority of male sculptors. It was not until the period between 1931 and 1938 that she exhibited in a Salon for women only: the Salon des femmes artistes modernes, a group formed by Marie-Anne Camax-Zoegger in 1930. Suzanne Valadon and Tamara de Lempicka became the Salon’s most famous representatives, but the sculptors Camille Claudel, Marguerite de Bayser-Gratry, Anna Bass, Berthe Martinie, Chana Orloff (who portrayed Yvonne Serruys in a bronze bust) and Jane Poupelet showed their works there too. Together with Poupelet, and alongside twelve male sculptors,

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Claudel and Serruys were selected for an exhibition of French art in Zürich, in February and March 1913—right before Claudel’s internment.12

Even if Camille Claudel herself did not visit her neighbour and colleague, her younger brother, poet, dramatist and diplomat Paul Claudel, a friend of Yvonne’s younger brother Daniel, did. Paul Claudel and his wife Reine Sainte-Marie-Perrin were frequent guests at the so-called “salons du samedi” hosted by the couple Mille-Serruys during the winter seasons between 1910 and 1940. These gatherings at their home were frequented by a profusion of French and Belgian prominent intellectuals, writers, artists and (socialist) politicians, among them supposedly Anatole France (his reading from a novel by Pierre Mille at a salon of his mistress, Mme Arman de Caillavet, is supposed to have led to the meeting of Pierre Mille and Yvonne Serruys), Anna de Noailles, Emile Bernard, Armen Ohanian, Isadora Duncan, Auguste Rodin, Antoine Bourdelle (of whose Ram the couple bought a bronze in 1918, and with whom they corresponded), Emile Claus, Jenny Montigny, Léon Blum, Charles Seignobos, Edouard Herriot and Emile Vandervelde.13

Philippe Berthelot, writer and diplomat, was also one of the guests at the Milles’. He shared many interests with Pierre Mille, and worked with Daniel Serruys on the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Serruys made a bust of Berthelot, and later he would be best man at the wedding of her niece, Yvonne Serruys junior.14 Berthelot was also on friendly terms with Paul and Camille Claudel. He owned a few of Claudel’s best sculptures, such as Vertumne et Pomone, Les Causeuses and L’Âge mûr, but later she would reproach Berthelot, just as her brother, with being partly responsible for her internment. The famous art critic Louis Vauxcelles, who frequently

13 Nicole Vanraes-Van Camp, Yvonne Serruys 1873-1953 (Menen: Verraes, 1987), 28-30; Sterckx 2003. The Belgian socialist politician Emile Vandervelde knew Lucie Delarue too; she wrote an article about him in L’Œuvre and mentioned him in another. Yvonne Serruys described their “salons du samedi” in her Les Cahiers du samedi, but these, and thus the actual guest list, unfortunately have not survived. Emile Bernard portrayed Paul Claudel in 1910, in a double portrait with Elémir Bourges (Musée d’Orsay).
wrote positively about Yvonne Serruys, was probably also one of the guests at the “salons du samedi”. Louise Hervieu, who is also mentioned in Réval’s book and was a member of Camax-Zoegger’s *Femmes artistes modernes*, thanked Vauxcelles for introducing her to “the admirable Pierre Mille and the admirable Yvonne Serruys”.

Claudel and Serruys can both be named in relation to the commission for a monument to the poet Albert Samain in Lille. Immediately after the poet’s death in 1900, Camille Claudel was approached to erect a statue in his native city. In 1901, she wrote to the painter Eugène Carrière to thank him for the offer, but inquired about the financial conditions and the names of all the committee members who had recommended her—presumably suspicious of an intervention by Carrière’s good friend, Auguste Rodin. Eventually, it was not Claudel but Serruys who got the commission, some 25 years later. There is no doubt of her husband’s influence in this particular instance; as a Lille-born writer he was a member of the founding committee. His wife was then a respected modern sculptor. Anyway, at the unveiling of the statue in the Jardin Vauban in 1931, Claudel had been entirely forgotten, whereas Serruys’ visual translation of Samain’s poems entitled *Aux flancs du vase* was highly praised.

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15 Birnbaum, *op. cit.*, 54.
17 Anne Rivière and Bruno Gaudichon, *Camille Claudel. Correspondance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 165: “Je ne pourrais [vraiment?] donner une réponse à ce sujet que lorsque je connaîtrai exactement le prix que ce buste serait payé et les noms du groupe d’amis qui me le recommanderait”.
Yvonne & Lucie

When another memorial for Albert Samain, created again by Yvonne Serruys, was inaugurated in Magny-les-Hameaux (Yvelines) already in 1925, an unpublished poem by writer and artist Lucie Delarue (1874-1945) was recited by Caristie Martel of the Comédie-Française. Presumably, Serruys had a hand in this, as the two women knew each other well at the time, and artists’ friendship often implied trying to help one another to obtain attention and commissions. Serruys made this solidarity among artists explicit in a 1938 letter elaborating on the services she received from the writers’ duo Marius-Ary Leblond (pseudonym of Georges Athénas and Aimé Merlo), and the favours she did them in return:

All the year long, the Leblond brothers help me or try to do so in my work: a statue for the Exhibition (1937) that is then sent to the Museum on Ile de la Réunion, small purchase for the Musée des Colonies, articles in La Vie. How could I refuse to do what is always done among friends, attract attention to works or books at a time when almost everybody has turned away from literary and artistic preoccupations?

The connection between Yvonne Serruys and Lucie Delarue was also made by Réval in her La Chaîne des dames, in 1924, one year prior to the Samain inauguration. One of their first encounters may, however, have already taken place at the 1906 Paris Salon d’automne. There, Serruys saw a bronze bust of Lucie Delarue by a Swiss sculptor, as she was then a member (the only woman) of the sculpture jury. When coming to see her

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19 Mercure de France printed the programme of the memorial ceremony on 7 June 1925: “À 14 heures 30, inauguration officielle du monument, œuvre de Mme Yvonne Serruys, et de la plaque commémorative.[...]Un poème inédit de Mme Delarue-Mardrus sera dit par Mme Caristie Martel, de la Comédie-Française.” Alfred Louis Edmond Vallette, “Echos”, Mercure de France 180:36 (1925): 564. The monument is in the cemetery. There is also a commemorative plaque on Samain’s house.

20 Letter from Yvonne Serruys to Arthur Pellegrin, 22 March 1938, La Garde, private archive.


portrait in the exhibition, Lucie may have seen Serruys’ five sculptures and the ten decorative glass art objects she had made in cooperation with the glass factory of Georges Desprets—a collaboration she had probably obtained, by the way, through her friend, the artist Marguerite de Glori, whom she immortalised in a large marble bust (Menen, Stadsmuseum). Whether Delarue and Serruys actually knew each other at that time is unclear, but they must have heard of each other, as their names appeared in magazines and newspapers, and their paths must have crossed more than once in early 20th-century Paris. Maybe literally too, as Lucie also lived on the Île Saint-Louis with her husband Jean-Charles Mardrus (a physician and translator of One Thousand and One Nights into French) until 1915, when the couple separated. They lived at 17 Quai d’Orléans, a street parallel to the Quai de Bourbon. Their apartment on the first floor contained works of art by, amongst others, Odilon Redon, Kees Van Dongen and Auguste Rodin. The latter was a frequent visitor there and, according to Myriam Harry (pseudonym of Maria Rosette Shapira), Rodin was not only interested in Lucie’s company but also in her body, which he would have liked to sculpt.

That is exactly what Yvonne Serruys did. In one of her undated notebooks, called Pensées, she wrote that she took Lucie Delarue as a model for a nude statuette, meanwhile dwelling on Lucie’s good temper, androgynous body, and lesbianism—this making her part of a proper network, “Lesbos-Paris”:

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24 “Les Mardrus occupèrent le premier étage, au balcon ventru comme une commode de l’époque, aux hautes pièces lambrissées. […] Autour, un tableau d’Odilon Redon, composé selon les vers de Lucie, un autre de Van Dongen, plusieurs dessins à la sanguine de Rodin, et, au milieu de la pièce, assis sur un socle de bois, le plâtre original de son premier Balzac nu. Rodin, à cette époque, venait souvent à la maison du sonnet d’Arvers, attiré par la petite tête de l’‘Aurige couronnée de nattes’ et rêvait de sculpter son corps, ‘aux jambes apolloniennes d’Hermaphrodite’.” Harry, op. cit., 33-34. Harry was the first to receive the “Prix Fémina” en 1904. In 1913 Camille Marbo (pseudonym of Marguerite Borel) received this prize for her novel La Statue voilée. It remains to be verified whether there is any link with the statues of Serruys or Delarue.
Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, of whom I made a small statue, had a superb androgynous body. Nature had fitted her perfectly for the role she played among the women of her time. She was besides, a kind and indulgent woman who, under the influence of Mardrus, the translator of The Thousand and One Nights and a real rake, had become the queen of Lesbos-Paris.25

Lucie Delarue too mentioned the sittings in her memoirs: “At that time I sat for Yvonne Serruys [sic] in her studio […] Yvonne Serruys, cheerful, witty and outstandingly intelligent, made an admirable bronze which I am proud to have at home.”26 Lucie actually began sculpting herself around the time of her posing for Serruys, who may have inspired her.27 Gabrielle Réval also tells of Lucie’s sittings for Yvonne in La Chaîne des Dames, as do some other women writers: Emilie de Villers, Myriam Harry (Lucie’s friend and another woman discussed by Réval), and Henriette Charasson.28 Charasson alludes to it in a 1926 article in La Femme de France, mentioning four other women featuring in Réval’s book: Anna de Noailles, Rachilde, Gérard d’Houville and Aurel.29

According to these descriptions, the sittings resulted in a statuette of a standing, fairly robust nude with a special hairdo. Delarue owned a bronze version with a green patina, which stood on her desk in 1926.30 Serruys’ sculpture entitled Contemporaine (bronze and plaster versions are in a private collection, fig.3) seems a good match. When it was shown in 1918, a critic in Les Arts indicated that he recognised “a notorious Paris face” and “identified” the body as that of a “young Normandy woman”–Lucie

25 Yvonne Serruys, paragraph on Lucie Delarue in her notebook with Pensées, s.d., s.p. [60]. Statue in Menin, private collection.
29 Charasson, op.cit., 26-27.
30 Charasson, op. cit., 26; Delarue, op. cit., 213.
was born in Honfleur, but already in her forties at the time. The head of *Contemporaine*, with a fairly pointed chin and characteristic hairdo with a headband, does look like a known picture of Lucie Delarue.

Pierre Mille, who covered the 1918 Salon for the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, provided a picture of his wife’s *Contemporaine* in his article and briefly referred to the particular representation of the female body: “Mme Serruys has a strong feeling for the stasis of female bodies”. Réval explained this “statique féminine” as “the balance specific to the construction of a female body” and mentioned the “boy woman” (“garçonne”) type as observable in Serruys’ female nudes, including *Contemporaine*. In interviews and letters, Serruys formulated her opinion—which could then be labelled as feminist—concerning the “new woman” and the representation of the female nude, from a woman artist’s point of view. This is especially true of the “Roaring Twenties”, when she modelled her young women with androgynous features, modest bosoms, and bobbed hair.

**Yvonne & Natalie**

Yvonne Serruys was indeed part of a fairly feminist women’s network in Paris, even if she was not a feminist in all her opinions. At the literary


33 “Qu’on pense à la femme garçon, ou pour mieux dire à ces jeunes Grecques du musée des Antiques […] Mais la force, l’harmonie, l’élégance, la beauté de ces corps ne sont pas les seuls caractères de la statuaire d’Yvonne Serruys. Son Ève, sa Nageuse, sa Contemporaine, son Offrande, son torse de jeune fille, sa Cantatrice, sa Déesse des Jardins, son Faune aux enfants révèlent des êtres qui pensent, qui aiment et qui agissent. Ils ont une vie spirituelle qui rayonne de leurs visages de pierre.”, Réval 1924, op. cit., 200-201.

34 For example, Serruys was not convinced of the presence of genius in women; she rather believed women passed on genius via their children. (Yvonne Serruys,
salon of Léontine Lippmann, better known as Mme Arman de Caillavet, for example, she met her husband, but also influential women writers such as Sándor Kéméri (pseudonym of the Hungarian Mme Györgyné Bölöni), Anna de Noailles and Marcelle Tinayre. In 1905, Tinayre (also featuring in Réval’s book) delivered the opening speech and wrote the preface to the catalogue of Serruys’ second individual exhibition in the Paris gallery Barbazanges. In a 1948 letter, Serruys wrote that she knew Anna de Noailles, who was portrayed by Rodin in 1906, well. Sandor Kéméri later published a favourable review of Serruys in Les Dimanches de la femme, and dedicated a chapter of her book Promenades d’Anatole France (1927) to “Yvonne Mille-Serruys” (the one entitled “Deux extrêmes se rencontrent: la visite de Rodin”), another chapter to Yvonne’s mother Marie Valcke, and still another to “madame Fernand Grenard”, this being Yvonne’s younger sister Berthe. This is another proof of the close ties between the Serruys family members and their partly shared network.

During the First World War, Yvonne Serruys was one of the guests at the Parisian salon, held each Friday, of the three-years-younger and openly lesbian American feminist writer and art collector Natalie Clifford Barney (1876-1972), as mentioned in Réval’s La Chaîne des dames:

“Foi en la femme de France”, Encyclopédie de la France d’Outre-Mer (1946); Catherine Fournier, Marius-Ary Leblond, Écrivains et Critiques d’Art, (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001), 265-66.)


36 “J’ai bien connu Anna de Noailles, et à travers sa conversation passionnée, qui ne laissait aucune place à la réplique, j’ai senti d’une manière fulgurante la nette dualité de l’âme et du corps. Après avoir ébloui et fatigué une table de douze Français notoires, elle s’est glissée doucement sur le divan du Salon. Son frêle squelette d’oiseau ne dépassait pas de 10 centimètres le niveau de la surface velouté du meuble et entre les coussins, on ne voyait que deux yeux étincelants qui, positivement, hypnotisaient l’assistance. Je devais parler d’elle dans mes Mémoires, [...]”, letter from Yvonne Serruys to Yvonne Pellegrin, 18 December 1948, La Garde, private archive.

I met her [Y. Serruys] at the meetings held at Miss Barney’s, in a delightful small Greek temple erected between the courtyard and the garden. [...] Yvonne Serruys was one of the last ones to come to Miss Barney’s […] This newcomer to the Temple of Friendship spoke in a curt and self-assertive manner, her eloquence was concise, of a woman little interested in words or images, a woman who has no time to waste.  

In her Pensées, Serruys later attested her presence at these legendary gatherings: “Miss Barney’s autocab came to fetch me one day and drove me to one of these amusing Fridays of the rue Jacob”. Among the cultural celebrities visiting Barney’s salon were many of the guests formerly frequenting the salon of Mme Arman de Caillavet, who died in 1910, as well as figures from the American cultural scene—many of those people also frequented the “salons du samedi”. One can cite among Barney’s guests Auguste Rodin, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Valéry, Anatole France (who also became a close friend of the Mille-Serruys couple, and who prefaced Armen Ohanian’s first book in 1918), Jean Cocteau (of whom Serruys made a bust), Robert de Montesquiou, Paul Claudel, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote, Ezra Pound, and many others. Among them were also several American and French avant-garde women (some known as lesbians), often referred to as the “Women of the Left Bank”: Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Beach, Janet Flanner, Isadora Duncan, Peggy Guggenheim, Adrienne Monnier, Françoise Sagan, Marguerite Yourcenar, and Colette (also mentioned in Réval’s booklet). 

Armen Ohanian and Lucie Delarue knew Natalie Barney too, and both had a brief love affair with her. Lucie Delarue based a fictitious character on Barney in one of her novels. Natalie Barney and Yvonne Serruys too sent each other affectionate letters that referred to their meetings and are telling of a lasting friendship—in Serruys’ words: “You and I have been in tune for a long time”. In 1934, Yvonne offered to draw Natalie’s portrait:

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39 Yvonne Serruys, paragraph on Lucie Delarue in her booklet Pensées, s.d., s.p. [68], Menen, private collection.
42 Letter from Yvonne Serruys to Natalie Barney, 18 October, no year, Fonds Natalie Barney, NCB C 1353, Fonds spécifiques, Paris, Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet. The Fonds Natalie Clifford Barney preserves several letters from Yvonne
“They say my drawings are very good at the moment. Bring me your beautiful head, just for an hour”.

**Yvonne & Jenny**

Shortly after Yvonne’s death, in June 1953, Natalie Barney wrote some consoling words to Yvonne’s much younger sister, Jenny Serruys (1886-1983). It is clear from this letter that they used to visit each other too: “And I enclose a couple of sentences copied from Yvonne’s angular handwriting. They might bring a smile to your face again. If the smile lasts long enough for you to come to me one of these Fridays, I’ll be happy to see you again—or when you can or wish to, either at my place or yours, just the two of us.”

During the interwar period, Jenny hosted a proper literary salon with her husband, the American writer and translator William Aspenwall Bradley. Many of their guests, such as Ernest Hemingway, André Malraux, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, also frequented other salons mentioned here, and were also part of Yvonne’s network. Lucie Delarue also knew the Bradley-Serruys couple. They exchanged letters concerning Lucie’s publications, and William

Serruys to Natalie Barney: NCB C 1350-NCB C 1359 (6 letters and 1 postcard from Serruys to Barney, 1924-1937), NCB C2 2866 (2 letters from Serruys to Barney, 1939). Letters have also been preserved here between Barney and, among others, Lucie Delarue, Jenny and William Bradley and Sarah Bernhardt. The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center also keeps correspondence between Barney and Serruys. For instance: “Je suis toujours au dur service de l’amour ce qui ne me laisse que trop peu de temps pour moi–et vous!–mais l’amitié est si délicieuse pour vous que j’irai l’embrasser prochainement en votre personne. […] Je reste dans ma chambre (seule pièce chauffée) vendredi et serai chez vous un samedi entre autrui. Mais venez ici afin que je vous (sic) puisse vous voir. […] Et toujours votre très aimante amie.”, Letter from Natalie Barney to Yvonne Serruys, 8 December, no year, in Natalie Barney folder, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The William A. Bradley Literary Agency Records, 3.8, Austin, Texas. Natalie also refers to Yvonne’s husband in the letter: “J’exige que le Pierre Mille porte les petits mocassins pour mon retour”.

Letter from Yvonne Serruys to Natalie Barney, 16 April 1934, Fonds Natalie Barney, NCB C 2866, Fonds spécifiques, Paris, Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet. Whether this portrait was actually made or not remains unknown.

Bradley mentioned her in his book with René Lalou on *Contemporary French literature* from 1924.45

The Bradley-Serruys couple is remembered mainly for the pre-eminent William A. Bradley Literary Agency, which they opened in 1923, Quai de Béthune on the Ile Saint-Louis. In the interwar period they represented mostly American, English and French authors on both sides of the Atlantic, and introduced new and experimental European literature, such as James Joyce, Jean-Paul Sartre, Anaïs Nin, and Gertrude Stein, to American readers. In Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, William Bradley is characterized as “the friend and comforter of Paris authors”.46 Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, the noted lesbian booksellers of the Paris bookshop *Shakespeare & Company*, allegedly advised William and Jenny to get to know James Joyce.47 Before her marriage in 1921, Jenny Serruys was already a friend of the Irish author, lending him a bed and a table on which he supposedly completed *Ulysses*, and in 1950 she translated *The Exiles*.48

Many translations of the William A. Bradley Literary Agency were published by Georges Crès, who also published Réval’s *La Chaîne des dames* and some books by Yvonne’s husband. It is certainly no coincidence

45 René Lalou and William Aspenwall Bradley, *Contemporary French literature* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1924). Approximately 75 pages of letters are preserved in Austin, Texas, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, the William A. Bradley Literary Agency Records, TXRC06-A20, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus folder. The list of correspondents at the William A. Bradley Literary Agency Records (http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/uthrc/00300/hrc-00300p1.html), contains, among others, Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill, Georges Clemenceau, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Ezra Pound, Alexandra David-Neel, Maurice Maeterlinck, Vladimir Nabokov, Igor Stravinsky, Romola Nijinsky, Isadora Duncan, Josephine Baker, Peggy Guggenheim, Aristide Maillol, Marc Chagall, Georges Rouault, Colette, Djuna Barnes, Alice Toklas and Natalie Barney. The index also mentions the Australian painter Stella Bowen, who exhibited a portrait, “Madame Serruys” (as nr. 53), in 1925 at the Paris Salon of the *Société nationale des Beaux-Arts*. This could be Marie, Yvonne or Jenny. The Rare Book & Manuscript Library of Columbia University Libraries in New York also keeps archival material from Jenny Serruys (MS#0400: Helen Worden Erskine papers, boxes 31-34) and her husband (MS#0144: William Aspenwall Bradley Papers 1900-1966, 4 boxes). These thousands of pages have still to be examined.


47 See Benstock, *op. cit.*, 194-229.

48 After Bradley’s death in 1939, Jenny took over responsibility for the agency, which kept his name. 1923 also saw the foundation, Quai d’Anjou, of Robert McAlmon’s and Bryher’s publishing house, Contact Editions.
then, that in 1925, at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, Yvonne Serruys was commissioned to decorate the pavilion of the publishers Crès & Cie with one of her sculptures: *Leda and the Swan*. The pavilion itself was constructed by the architects Joseph Hiriart, Georges Beau and Georges Tribout, with whom Serruys collaborated on several of her public monuments, some of them in the French protectorate of Tunisia.

**Conclusion**

Then as now, circles of friends and acquaintances, as well as networking, were essential for an artist aspiring to a career, and indispensable in competing for commissions. Maintaining a rich social network has long allowed women to strengthen their contacts and move amidst an extended, if private circle, which was more acceptable for women than official functions in institutions. Of course, one cannot say that purely strategic considerations were at the basis of their letters, meetings, their help to one another, or their taking part in or organizing salons. Yet, all these certainly had an impact. Salons in particular were ideal opportunities to expand their network of clients, potential patrons and critics, and as such to promote their work. Social networks worked for women artists just as they did for their male colleagues; they strengthened their public image through the association of their names with those of famous acquaintances or guests.

While it is definitely more difficult to visualise social and professional networks in a time before the existence and widespread use of social network sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn nowadays, it is nevertheless possible to trace historical links between people and rebuild part of their networks, mainly through contemporary sources, such as correspondence, articles, books, artworks, etc. This study of Yvonne Serruys aims to illustrate, through an incomplete selection of facts, anecdotes and examples,

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49 Sterckx 2003, *op. cit.*, 90-91, 113. It was not site-specific; she already exhibited a *Leda (and the swan)* in 1920 in Paris and in 1924 in Liège.

50 In North Africa, according to Hélène Bokanowsky, "Yvonne Serruys was also involved with the publishing of literature. It appears to have been her initiative to set up a publishing centre in Cairo, where she laboured to re-edit several French classics and some anthologies that were successfully circulated in North Africa and the Middle-East.", Hélène Bokanowsky, "French Literature in Algiers", *Books Abroad* 19:2 (Spring 1945): 130. Presumably, however, this concerns Yvonne Serruys junior, whose husband, André Vigneau, was appointed by the Egyptian government to promote the film industry in Egypt. (Vanraes, *op. cit.*, 108.)
how a diverse network not only contributed to an artist’s rich social life, but also proved to be crucial in her artistic career, as inspiration, through commissions and support. This case study also reveals that a specific women’s network (a “chain of ladies”) was active in Paris in the first half of the 20th century.

A select group of intellectual and artistic women, mostly from the same socio-cultural milieu (the (upper) bourgeoisie), of about the same age, living geographically close, with an interest in arts and literature, and often with similar feminist ideas or sympathies, maintained close ties, through affectionate letters, meetings, sittings, and salons—meeting places traditionally hosted by enterprising and inspiring women. On these occasions, contacts could be shared and networks extended. These networks have proved to be of direct or indirect influence on the professional choices of artists and the reception of their work. Several people in the networks mentioned here were included in Gabrielle Réval’s book *La Chaîne des dames*. Yvonne Serruys, still missing in most literature on Barney and the “women of the left bank”, formed a “delicate link” (“maillon délicat”) within this “small chain” (“petite chaîne”) of women, to use her own terminology in a letter to Natalie Barney: “It would be[...]a very great pity for those men and women who will come after us not to know of this fine chain whose delicate links tie our hours and our lives at a time when they are so frail and uncertain.51”

**Works Cited**


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Fig. 2 (© City Museum 't Schippershof, Menen, Belgium)

Fig. 3