



Guy Pène du Bois  
American, 1884 - 1958

## *Café du Dôme*

1925/1926

oil on wood

overall: 55.2 x 46 cm (21 3/4 x 18 1/8 in.)

framed: 66 x 56.8 x 2.9 cm (26 x 22 3/8 x 1 1/8 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Guy Pène du Bois [19]25; lower right: Guy Pène du Bois [19]26

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.136

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### ENTRY

Guy Pène du Bois painted *Café du Dôme* at the beginning of a lengthy stay in France, where he lived from 1924 to 1930. [1] These years were the most productive period of his artistic career. For subject matter, Pène du Bois turned to scenes of daily Parisian life, often revisiting themes that he had first explored in New York. Previously, as a young art student in Paris in 1905, Pène du Bois had been an “almost daily” habitué of the Café du Dôme, 108 Boulevard du Montparnasse, which he described in his autobiography as the city’s “Anglo-American cafe.” [2] The café had opened in 1898 and was a popular meeting place for artists. After returning to Paris in 1924, Pène du Bois began to frequent the café again, observing that “with the billiard tables removed, [it] seemed larger and certainly more crowded than I had ever seen it.” [3]

*Café du Dôme* typifies Pène du Bois’s penchant for representing fashionable, mysterious people engaged in undefined, but potentially suggestive, behavior. Two women wearing formfitting evening dresses sit along the wall in a corner of the café, an empty wooden table before them. The woman closest to the viewer looks into the café with a vacant expression. She rests her right hand on the table and keeps her left at her side in a fist, her posture appearing somewhat tense. Her companion sits with her arms folded and elbows resting on the table, and she looks up in the viewer’s direction. Her pose and expression are reminiscent of depictions of Parisian women by the renowned French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864 - 1901) such as *Poudre de riz* (1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam). The women’s attire and their noticeable uneasiness was interpreted

by contemporary art critic Royal Cortissoz as a manifestation of a “devastatingly representative character.” [4] In her 2004 book on Pène du Bois, art historian Betsy Fahlman described the painting as “two predatory and snaky flappers, alert to the possibility of the evening’s entertainment, their jewelry as minimal as their slinky dresses. An atmosphere of psychological tension underlies the apparent smart set.” [5]

Pène du Bois’s composition is related to similar café scenes by European artists, beginning with Edgar Degas’s *Dans un café* (1876, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) and the many subsequent variations of the theme by Toulouse-Lautrec, Édouard Manet (French, 1832 - 1883), Auguste Renoir (French, 1841 - 1919), Jean-Louis Forain (French, 1852 - 1931), Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853 - 1890), and Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 - 1973). The best-known café subject by an American at the time was *At Mouquin’s* (1905, Art Institute of Chicago), an early masterpiece by William Glackens (American, 1870 - 1938). Pène du Bois illustrated this painting in his book on Glackens, whom he considered “my favorite among American painters.” [6] The early café scenes by Pène du Bois’s close friend—and fellow classmate of Robert Henri (American, 1865 - 1929)—Edward Hopper (American, 1882 - 1967), such as *Le Bistro* (1909) and *Soir Bleu* (1914, both Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), evoke a similar air of ambiguity. Hopper’s *Automat* (1927, Des Moines Art Center, IA) and *Chop Suey* (1929, private collection), slightly later than *Café du Dôme*, parallel the tension and loneliness—even in public space—of the Pène du Bois painting.

In the Chester Dale Collection papers, *Café du Dôme* is listed as *Watchful Waiting*, or, *At the Café Dôme*, a title that could suggest multiple interpretations for the painting. For whom or what are the women waiting? Are they waiting for someone they know, someone they don’t know, or perhaps simply for something to happen to break the monotony of the evening? The painting was also formerly exhibited as *Polish Sisters at the Café du Dôme*, and in his 1931 monograph on Pène du Bois, Cortissoz referred to the work as *Sisters, Café du Dôme*. [7] “Sister” was sometimes a euphemism for “sex worker,” [8] and Pène du Bois’s *The Sisters* (1919, Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, MN), in which two women sit together in an intimate pose with their arms intertwined, could be read in this way. While the women in *Café du Dôme* could be waiting for clients, Pène du Bois has left their purpose and motivations unclear. The empty table reinforces the theme of waiting, as the women have no food or drink to occupy themselves, and the table only serves as a platform for their unsettled body language. This painting exemplifies Pène du

Bois's interest in depicting a range of personalities, particularly those outside mainstream propriety. The National Gallery of Art's three Pène du Bois Paris paintings, *La Rue de la Santé*, *Café du Dôme*, and *Pierrot Tired*, reflect the artist's uncompromising realism, rejection of conventional morality, and affinity with modern life in France.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

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## NOTES

- [1] The presumably original signature on the left seems to have been applied with a nonpigmented resinous material. It is possible that the artist added the second signature on the right because the resinous material had degenerated with the passage of time and become indistinct. Unable to either read the original date or recall the year he had executed the painting, Pène du Bois simply guessed that it had been 1926.
  - [2] Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 113.
  - [3] Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 218.
  - [4] Royal Cortissoz, *Guy Pène du Bois* (New York, 1931), 9.
  - [5] Betsy Fahlman, *Guy Pène du Bois: Painter of Modern Life* (New York, 2004), 40.
  - [6] Guy Pène du Bois, *William J. Glackens* (New York, 1931), 52, and Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 175. Pène du Bois would also have been familiar with George Luks's response to Glackens's painting, *The Cafe Francis* (c. 1906, Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH).
  - [7] Royal Cortissoz, *Guy Pène du Bois* (New York, 1931), 9. Early critics similarly identified the ambiguous women in John Sloan's *Three A.M.* (1909, Philadelphia Museum of Art) as "bohemians" or "sisters," when it is likely that they are sex workers. See Patricia Hills, "John Sloan's Images of Working-Class Women," *Prospects* 5 (1980): 174. The National Gallery's painting was listed in Walter Pach, *Modern Art in America* (New York, 1928), no. 17, as *At the Café Dome*.
  - [8] See Suzanne L. Kinser, "Prostitutes in the Art of John Sloan," *Prospects* 9 (1984): 231–254, 246.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support consists of a commercially prepared artist's wood panel that retains the supplier's sticker from Cesar Guichardaz, Rue du Dragon, Paris. The grain of the wood runs in the vertical direction and the edges on the reverse are beveled. The warm, creamy white ground is visible through the paint layers. The surface of the ground is slightly pebbly, and this texture makes itself apparent where the paint is more thinly applied. It is probable that the pebbly texture is the result of the process of ground application by roller. Paint is applied in both wet-into-wet and wet-over-dry layers. The tones of the skin are painted with small, stiff brushstrokes with other areas in looser strokes. There appears to be a lower layer of blue beneath the figures that emerges around the figures' outlines, creating a halo effect. Other than inpainting along a crack at the top center and in an isolated area in the background, the paint layer is in good condition. The surface is coated with a relatively thin layer of natural resin varnish. There is a layer of grime on top of the varnish that imparts a milky quality to the painting.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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## PROVENANCE

The artist; (Kraushaar Galleries, New York); sold 11 June 1926 to Chester Dale [1883-1962], New York; bequest 1963 to NGA.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1925 Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Guy Pène du Bois, C.W. Kraushaar Art Galleries, New York, 1925, no. 6.

1926 The Exhibition of Tri-National Art: French, British, American, Wildenstein Galleries, New York, 1926, no. 28, as Polish Sisters at the Café du Dome.

1927 13th Annual Exhibition of American Art, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1927, no. 35.

 **NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS**  
*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

1928 Eleventh Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., no. 77.

1965 The Chester Dale Bequest, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1965, unnumbered checklist.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1931 Cortissoz, Royal. *Guy Pène du Bois*. New York, 1931: 9.
- 1965 *Paintings other than French in the Chester Dale Collection*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 56, repro.
- 1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 48, repro.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 145, repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 258, repro.
- 2014 Fahlman, Betsy. "Complicating the Modern Woman: Guy Pène du Bois in France." *Antiques* (May-June 2014): 98-99 fig. 1, 101.
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