

Patricia Fernandez

Professor Rodríguez

HUM 1020

15 September 1999

*La Belle Epoque*: Living in Denial

There was a period in history called *La Belle Epoque* that took place between 1890 and 1914. It is also the title of a documentary film that shows what the world was like then, particularly defining this time in France, England and the United States. In France this period was known as *la Belle Epoque*; in England, as the Victorian and Edwardian Ages; and in the United States, the Gilded Age. It was a time when the rich were very rich and society was divided into the elite, on the one hand, and everyone else, on the other. But there were many forces at work that would ultimately destroy this enchanted period: intellectuals, artists, anarchists, technology, the suffragette movement, and, ultimately, World War I.

*La Belle Epoque* was a beautiful era for France, whose culture focused on beauty. The rich lived a fairytale existence and did not allow reality to intrude into their lives. There was a strong division between the rich and poor. The world belonged to fashionable society, and Paris was the fashion capital of the world. Artists, however, refused to live by these rules and insisted on artistic and personal freedom. Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin experimented with their own personal artistic vision thereby repudiating a tradition that seemed hypocritical to say the least.

In England, Queen Victoria ruled the country. It was the time when the British Empire was expanding its dominion, when the pursuit of power shaped life and English values, and when society and culture played by Victoria's rules. In the need of raw materials, England colonized one quarter of the world and became the most powerful nation on earth. If one didn't play by these rigid rules, however, one became an outcast. Oscar Wilde was a case in point. One day he became tired of hiding the truth of his homosexuality, and, as a result, he was thrown in prison. After he got out of jail a broken man, he died of heartbreak.

In the United States, the rich were dedicated to making money and showing off their new found wealth. They built great "cottages" in Newport and married off their daughters to European titled nobility in the hope of validating their new fortunes and making an imprint on the new society. Consuelo Vanderbilt, who was married off to the Duke of Marlborough in a loveless match, was used by her family in order to upstage Newport society and establish them as a source with which to contend with. In the end, Consuelo rebelled, left the Duke, and forged a new life for herself.

This era, however, was doomed by the many changes that were taking place in the real world. World fairs celebrated the new technology which was rapidly transforming the way life was lived and experienced. Artists and intellectuals, moreover, were becoming weary of a world that refused to face reality and explore human freedom. Political anarchists were also becoming more violent in their pursuit of freedom, assassinating five heads of state during this period of time. Furthermore, women were tired of being mere ornaments and demanded the right to vote. The final blow to this era was provided by World War I, the harshest reality that shook this society to its very core. The world would never be the same.