

# “A closed world”: Pierre de Coubertin as a possible guest in the Proustian Salons in Paris

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## Abstract

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In 1893, the writer Marcel Proust (1871-1922) stated in an article for *Le Gaulois* that “it was the salons that made reputations [...] very few great men succeeded without first passing through a salon”. The “closed world” of the salons with its rules and codes was suitable for establishing and developing networks (Weber 2018; Martin-Fugier, 2003). Interestingly, in his *Mémoires de jeunesse* (Clastres, 2008), Pierre de Coubertin demonstrated a fascination for the salons stating that the most “chic” salons were obviously the ones kept the closest”. Assuming that the successful restoration of the Olympic games would not have been possible for Pierre de Coubertin without a network of friends and persons who helped him to make it a reality, the question arises where his place was in the salon context. A current research project concentrating on Coubertin’s correspondence with women of his time, some of whom have been salon hostesses, and sheds light on his salon activities.

This paper presents preliminary research findings concerning the Comtesse de Greffulhe (1860-1952) who was the personification of the salons in Paris and whom Proust immortalised in the novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

## Keywords

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Pierre de Coubertin, Comtesse de Greffulhe, Marcel Proust, salons in Paris, networks.

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## **Introduction**

“If one could only peer beneath the roofs of Paris’s most beautiful hôtels, how amusing and charming it would be to see the graceful agitation of the beautiful women inside who are getting ready. As the weather is fine, their victorias await them by the front door in the courtyard, and before long, a hundred coachmen in different parts of town will be given the same address, gliding through warm, sunny streets [...] The first guests are starting to arrive, and Mme Greffulhe places them along the walls in the great reception room of the hôtel, keeping the middle on the salon free and clear for the arrival and progress of His Majesty” (Marcel Proust, 1902).

These lines in *Le Figaro* in 1903 were only one example of the articles in the daily press in Paris in the nineteenth century and twentieth century. The readership was eager to hear about the exclusive guest list, the vast mansions, the elegant dresses and suits, and to get a peek into the “closed world” of the salons. Started as social gatherings in the seventeenth century, the salons became increasingly important as places of power, money and influence over the centuries. The guests had different backgrounds, and among them were aristocrats, politicians, and intellectuals and celebrities. A mixture offering the perfect “soil” for building networks and influencing careers.

This paper is a first attempt to contextualize Pierre de Coubertin in Paris’s salon world. It addresses whether Coubertin had attended the salons and, if this had been the case, which evidence exists, therefore.

The introduction explains its main structures and mechanisms to better understand the salon as a “closed world”. The sources used,

therefore, were the salon research findings by the historians Anne Martin-Fugier (2003) and Petra Dollinger (2019) as well as by the scholar and Pulitzer price finalist Caroline Weber (2018). In addition, the novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust (1871-1922) provides a first-hand account of his time. At the same time, Proust’s narration enables the presentation of the Comtesse de Greffulhe (1860-1952), a well-known hostess. The section explains how she built her image and mentions some guests.

The Comtesse’s network opens the way for tracing Pierre de Coubertin’s relation to the salons in the next section. Unfortunately, there is not much evidence for his family’s activities there, but, in contrast, his *Memoires de jeunesse* (Clastres, 2008) evidence his attendance at Paris’s salons and mention the Comtesse de Greffulhe.

Coubertin’s mentioning coincides with a recent research project about the Baron’s correspondence with women of his time. The preliminary findings discovered evidence that he and the Comtesse knew each other, met and have been in contact over many years.

In ending, the paper presents open questions that future research needs to address.

## **The salon world in Paris**

“A salon is first a woman, primarily a witty woman” (Martin-Fugier, 2003, p.8).

In the nineteenth and twentieth century the members of the Parisian high society lived the salon tradition. In social gatherings, always hosted by women, the guests met to make conversation, sometimes to dine together, listen to concerts or dance. The activities were enjoyable, and the guest’s challenge was to

make it to the list and receive an invitation card.

Intensive research about the salons unveiled that the guests had been exclusively admitted into this “closed world” when mastering the codes of practices and language transferred by the right background and the appropriate education. Thus, once a hostess accepted a person, he or she became part of an (endless) series of invitations. And for the ladies, this meant that they had a new name on their guest lists to whom they wrote a counter-invitation.

In the seventeenth century, the gatherings in the “salon bleu” in the house of the Marquise Catherine de Vivonne de Rambouillet (1588–1665) laid the setting and rules for an event that would become a tradition over the centuries. Nevertheless, it was not until the eighteenth century when the French moralist Nicolas Chamfort (1741-1794) used the term salon for social conversational gatherings the first time. One of the rules was that each hostess had a particular day in the week, as Weber (2018, p. 175) explained [...] a salon was held in the drawing-room of a lady’s house, usually once a week on her chosen “day”. The habitués were known in society – and by hearsay, in the press – as the hostess’s inner circle. When that circle was very small and selective, it was reputed to be a “closed” salon: the gold-standard of mondain prestige”.

Moreover, according to Dollinger (2019, n.p.), it was the hostess who influenced the salon’s directions and reputation because “it was she, whom one wished to meet and talk to, who was in demand in her various roles (which she had to play and, where necessary, to improvise), and who was also responsible for the tone and the spirit of the salon”.

The salon research also unveiled information concerning the incentives and functions of the salons. According to Martin-Fugier, the guests benefited from enjoying the conversations with like-minded people, from creating an exchange between artists and patrons, from “finding an audience”, from “networking”, and from “advancing a career” (Martin-Fugier, pp. 142-6). Dollinger (2019) attributed three functions to the salons. Their purpose was to “cultivate a humanistic, aristocratic lifestyle”, to provide a “feminine free space”, and to offer a “sphere of influence, whether in the area of intellectual creativity or politics”.

Consequently, each salon focused on one topic such as literature, art or moral affairs, without neglecting the others and developed its topics over the years. In the 1820s, political interest grew and led to the creation of political salons. During the Third Republic (1870-1940), the variety of salons was at its peak, but the activities declined after the First World War. The abolition of the monarchies in many countries influenced the process because some guests lost their ranks and reputations. Another reason was the interest of the hostesses in topics “outside the house” and consequently, they started to lead a more independent lifestyle.

Concerning the salon’s challenges, nobody observed the salon world in Paris, its actors and encounters in more detail and more critical but the contemporary Marcel Proust (1871-1922), the first child of a Franco-Jewish family. His father being a doctor, the affluent family lived first in the Boulevard Malherbes and allowed Marcel to study at the Sorbonne. He graduated in law as early as 1893 and got a philosophy degree in 1895. Being an outsider by birth, his entry ticket to the salons’ closed

world has been his school classmate, Jacques Bizet (1872-1922). Bizet's mother, Geneviève Halévy Bizet Straus widow of the composer Georges Bizet (1838-1875), was among the well-known hostesses of the salons for Paris's high society (Martin-Fugier, 2003; Weber, 2018). Proust's acceptance into the Straus salon became the door-opener to all the salons in Paris where he met persons who pushed his career. "Among the moneyed jet-set of the period, Proust met in the various salons" (Sansom, 1973, p. 47) were many interesting and influential personalities, such as Comte Robert de Montesquiou (1855-1921), who helped him to grow his network.

Proust fascination for the salons formed the base for his writings but had a turning point during the Dreyfus affair<sup>1</sup> that opened his eyes and he "grew gradually disenchanted with the world of the coronets", as Sansom stated (p.67). All good and bad experiences culminated in Proust's opus magnum *A la recherche du temps perdu*, a novel in 12 volumes which, according to Sansom, "is not auto-biographical, but experience condensed into fiction" (p. 104). While the first nine volumes were published between 1913 and 1922, the last three only after his death, between 1923 and 1927. Proust integrated childhood memories in his novel and made slight changes to places at the coast in Normandy. For example, he changed the village Illiers into the fictive Combray, and Cabourg became the seaside place Balbec.

The writer made his eyewitness observations of the hostesses and their guests for four decades until his death and translated them into literature, creating a specific image that

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<sup>1</sup> In the winter of 1894, officer Alfred Dreyfus was accused and convicted by the court-martial to be a Prussian spy, having betrayed the interest of France. The case turned to have been a judicial error.

captured the persons and the atmosphere of his time. As Sansom (p. 10, p. 51) summarized, "Proust himself emphasized that anyone character was a composition of eight to ten facets of real people he knew [...] [and] analyses the various snobberies of Society and the middle classes. He sees emotional prejudice as easily at servant level as at bourgeoisie level or on the true-blue heights of princely anti-Semitism. In the novel, he pirouettes, but he records, too". The literature research findings confirmed Proust's "record", or better said eyewitness account. For example, concerning real persons in Proust's novel the Comte Robert de Montesquiou inspired Charlus Guermante while the Comtesse Greffulhe together with Madame Halévy Bizet Strauss and Laure de Sade Cheigné inspired the complex character of the Duchess de Guermantes (Hillerin, 2014; Weber, p. 10).

The background information and Proust's accounts conveyed the image of the salons explaining their source, their codes and the vital role of their hostesses. Subsequent, the following section introduces one of the it-hostesses in her time, the Comtesse de Greffulhe.

### **The Hostess - the Comtesse de Greffulhe**

"I finally saw the Comtesse Greffülhe [sic] (yesterday at Mme Wagram's) [...] and there is not a single element in her that one has ever seen in any other woman or even anywhere else. But the whole mystery of her beauty is in the sparkle, and above all the enigma, of her eyes." (Marcel Proust, July 2, 1893, as quoted in Weber, p. 560).

When Proust saw the Comtesse de Greffulhe for the first time, he wrote to his friend, Robert

de Montesquiou (1855-1921), who was her uncle, these lines (Pasler, 2008, p. 315; Kold, 1970, p. 217). This “beauty”, Elisabeth de Riquet de Caraman (1860-1952), was the child of a Franco-Belgian noble family, her mother being a descendent of the Montesquiou family and living in Paris. At the age of eighteen, Elisabeth married de Comte Henri Greffulhe (1848-1932), and her husband’s wealth enhanced her noble birth. Due to her status and social influence, she did not only become a salon hostess, but her fortune enabled her to establish herself as a patroness of the arts. For example, she promoted the American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), whom she met during a journey to the United States of America in 1887. In parallel, she founded the “Société des Grands auditions musicaux de France” in 1890, which organized auditions of known composers such as Claude Debussy (1862-1918) or Richard Wagner (1813-1883) (University of Glasgow, 2003; Pasler, 2008, p. 310). Among the society’s members were Prince Edmond de Polignac (1834-1901) and Félix Faure (1841-1899), the president of France between 1895 and 1899.

According to Weber (pp. 203-41), what made the Comtesse de Greffulhe special was not only her noble birth but the image of her own she created staging her appearances in public. An exclusive wardrobe for which she spent 30.000 Francs per year and her strategy of always coming late and leaving early built this image and transformed her into this desired but unreachable woman, “fueling” her reputation as one of the most important hostesses. Consequently, her salon guests were the most exclusive persons of the Parisian society. Thus, for example, the event described by Proust in the introduction was a salon with 200 guests, among them the Comtesse de

Noailles, the Duchesse de Bisaccia and King Oscar II of Schweden as identified by Weber (pp. 581-587).

The Duchesse’s image strategy included a third element: the press. This link enabled her to orchestrate her image’s communication and to nurture it. For example, she understood very early how helpful it was to leak information about the guest list to the journalists. As Weber researched, the Duchesse had cordial relationships with the directors Arthur Meyer from *Le Gaulois* and Gaston Calmette from *Le Figaro* (pp. 239-40). Her benefit of this “practice” was twofold because the journals’ articles mentioned her salons as well as attendances to other salons and events.

It was not only her connection with the press that made her an “enfant terrible”, but it was also her inappropriate behaviour that was against the “etiquette” (Weber, p. 237). For a person of her social class, it was the rigueur not to “get yourself talked about” (*se faire parler*) and to develop a sphere of influence outside the home (Pasler, p.293). In this context, Proust’s 3000 word article about the marvelous event at the Comtesse de Greffuhle’s house has to be mentioned, which was never published because of her husband’s objection (Alberge, 2018). The Comtesse’s sphere of influence at home had been her salons, and taking into account her “success” outside the house allows concluding that she organized them with great dedication.

Furthermore, due to the popularity of her salons, sometimes the guests faced challenges as the writer William Sansom (1912-1976) identified: “Also, to be invited with the gratin did not necessarily mean meeting them; even on the premises, one had to seek a further introduction, and follow this, if granted, with

some performance of wit or worth” (pp. 55-6). For example, Proust made this experience. The writer’s friendship with Montesquiou allowed him to move in the circle of the Comtesse de Greffulhe. Still, it was almost a year after the first encounter that Proust’s official introduction took place on 30 May 1894 (Weber, p. 532). Ever since, the writer had been a frequent guest at the Comtesse’s house.

As Weber researched, the Comtesse de Greffulhe understood to fill out her role as hostess perfectly. In addition, she was a good networker as it was confirmed by Pasler (p. 316), emphasizing that to be “armed with these personal, social and political advantages” helped her in networking, and “by mobilizing her numerous connections and with the savvy use of intermediaries, she helped others as much as they helped her”. Both statements demonstrate that the Comtesse de Greffulhe’s invitation was the access to an exclusive network where the guests got help for their ideas and undertakings. It has to be stressed that, although she had been an it-hostess, her life and achievements have fallen into oblivion. She was not only a patroness of the arts but studied photography in the famous studio of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, better known as Nadar (1820-1910), in Paris and funded Marie Curie’s research before she died in Lausanne in 1952 (Hillerin, 2014; de Crossé Brissac, 1991).

### **The guest - Pierre de Coubertin**

Having described the salon hostess Comtesse de Greffulhe and some of her guests, this section elaborates on how Pierre de Coubertin fitted into the salon world.

The book “Memoires de jeunesse” recaptured the family’s activities from Pierre de

Coubertin’s birth up to 1888, comparable to other noble families (Clastres, p. 34). As the Baron explained therein, the family divided the stays between the different houses throughout the year: “For us the year was broken down into seven months of winter and spring spent in Paris in the city in the old house where I was born and which I still lived at the age of 60: six weeks in our chalet in Étretat, two and a half months in Mirville (August and September), finally three weeks in October in Coubertin” (p. 33). Part of the activities at these places had been invitations, for which, the book provided two facts. First, during Pierre’s childhood, his father attended a “bal de gala” due to the 1869 World Fair together with the Prussian king and his Chancellor Bismarck as well as other royals. Second, among the guest to the de Coubertin’s was the “Count Nieuwerkerke, surintendant of Fine Arts and a friend of my father” (p. 34; Camps Y Wilant, 2018a). His mistress was Mathilde de Bonaparte (1820-1904), cousin of Napoleon III. and a well-known hostess of salons about whom Proust wrote in his salon article series. Unfortunately, proofs, such as invitations cards, for the gatherings are missing at this point in time.

In contrast, the information concerning the 1880s is more abundant because it evidenced that Pierre de Coubertin had a link to the salons in Paris (Clastres, pp. 83-93). Twenty-eight names of noble-born women paired with his impressions of the salons were eleven-page evidence that Coubertin attended these social gatherings without attributing hostess and/or guest roles to the women. One example was the Duchesse de Maillé, whose salon took place each Sunday evening in the wintertime and on Easter Monday, and who organized the traditional “white ball”, which was the “rite of passage for the “well (/high) born” young

people” (p. 86). With this sentence, Coubertin emphasized the importance of participating in the salons.

His accounts included the procedure around the salons as well. One challenge for the young men had been the right transportations means to get to a salon site “as there had been no metro and not taxi-autos [...] and it was inappropriate for young men to get there by omnibus” (p. 84). Another vital element had been the appropriate dressing “a bowler hat was only allowed in the morning” (p. 85). The most crucial element had been the visiting cards. The procedure required to send “antennary business cards to drop off upon receiving the invitation and again within eight to ten days after the ball, visiting cards to parents of young girls with whom we had danced for the first time” (p. 84). In addition, the timing of the sending the “cards could become a “real nightmare, because many ladies took it very badly when one put them in their homes at the hours when they (the ladies) were there” (p. 84). Unfortunately, Coubertin’s Memoires did not provide any source material regarding the salons and hostesses mentioned. Nevertheless, Coubertin’s descriptions allowed concluding that he mastered all the challenges. Even more, in entering this “contest”, he attested to the salons a particular reputation of which he was aware when stating that “the most chic salons were obviously the ones kept the closest” (p. 85).

### **The evidence – the visiting card(s)**

By coincidence, a recent research project addressed the lack of evidence concerning the visiting cards. In 2019, the researcher and

Pierre de Coubertin medal<sup>2</sup> bearer George Hirthler and the author started to analyze the Baron’s correspondence with women of his time whose letters are hosted in the International Olympic Committee (IOC) archive in Lausanne.

Therefore, the Baron’s correspondence, in total 74 documents, was transcribed, translated and contextualized. The preliminary findings shed light on Pierre de Coubertin’s involvement in the salon world because a name appeared among the correspondents - the Comtesse de Greffulhe. The same name appeared in his Mémoires (Clastres, 2008, p. 87) and had the annotation “née la Rouchfoucauld”. By doing so, Coubertin seemed to have missed that this had been her husband’s family line.

The invitation card reads as follows:

“Thank you Monsieur,

For your friendly letter – I am at my place Wednesday after 5.30 and will be very delighted to see you.” (Comtesse de Greffulhe, 1904).

While her invitation card sounds like an invitation to a personal meeting, another source that came up along the research project identified parts of it as a standard phrase for invitation cards. The evidence is a leather “album” in which Pierre de Coubertin collected all the visiting cards he received from 1882 to 1885. This primary source, also hosted in the IOC archives, was used the first time for the fictional novel *The Idealist*, in which Hirthler (2016, pp. 161-170) described how Coubertin might have experienced such a salon by using the salon of the Princess de Sagan as

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<sup>2</sup> In 2020 the International Olympic Committee awarded the Pierre de Coubertin medal to Hirthler for his excellent work on the Olympic Movement and the Baron’s life.

an example. Since the “album” has no title, this paper uses the term scrapbook further on. All invitation cards in this scrapbook have the exact wording structure using “(name) will be at her house (day) (time)”, the same pattern the Comtesse de Greffulhe used.

In addition to the names of the salons’ hostesses, the scrapbook provides additional information about some events. Next to the cards, Pierre annotated the names of his dance partners, the ones he had to write cards afterwards, as he mentioned above. The Comtesse’s name appears four times. In May 1883, there had been gatherings at the Comtesse de Pontèves and at the Baronne de Layre. The following year, both danced together at the Baronne de Schickler in February and at the Duchesse de Bisaccia in June. Therefore, the scrapbook proves that Pierre de Coubertin met the Comtesse de Greffulhe at some salons and allowed us to assume that both moved in the same circles of salons.

At this point in time, neither the author and Hirthler, nor Weber (2019) could trace the evidence in terms of Coubertin’s reply to the Comtesse’s invitation. The same is the case with the other noblewomen. Nevertheless, the source materials discussed evidence that Pierre de Coubertin and the Comtesse met at several salons in the 1880s and were in contact twenty years later.

It can be concluded that while attending the salons in Paris, Pierre de Coubertin started to build his network of persons who helped him move forward with his ideas. Thus, Proust’s judgement concerning benefits might also apply to the Baron as a salon guest:

“Salons [...] were places where people talk about everything, from literature to politics. It was in salons that reputations were made or

new ideas came under fire. Each salon took a clearly defined position, its habitués either promoting or attacking the new idea. In those days, very few great men succeeded without first passing through a salon, where they had the good sense to befriend an influential woman or two.” (Proust, 1893).

Unfortunately, the source material evaluated so far does not allow to appraise the Comtesse’s contribution in this case.

### **In search of the answers to the open questions**

The evidence presented in this paper enabled Pierre de Coubertin’s contextualization in the “closed world” of the salons in Paris. However, more important is the fact that it unveiled a connection between Coubertin and an it-hostess. This link needs to be elaborated on in more detail, and the following fields are important, therefore.

One of the future research fields is the Comtesse’s archive. It comprises a box with *personnes inconnues* meaning persons not identified yet but might host evidence related to Pierre de Coubertin. Unfortunately, more detailed research in the archives is not possible due to the current pandemic situation at this point in time.

Another future aspect is the need to elaborate on in more detail the extent to which Coubertin could have benefited from the Comtesse’s network, for example, when “recruiting” new IOC members. For example, Charles (Marie François?) de La Rochefoucauld (1863–1907?), cousin of Henri Greffulhe, had been a friend of Pierre de Coubertin since school and became a member of the Organizing Committee for the 1900 Olympic Games.



Further, other family members and befriended family members played a role in the Olympic movement. For example, the Comtesse's cousin, Prince Georges Bibesco (1880-1941), and Melchior de Polignac (1880-1950), great-nephew of Prince Edmond de Polignac, had both been IOC members (Coubertin, 1974, pp. 11-15).

The third set of questions will concentrate on more events and places where Coubertin and the Comtesse met. An example, therefore, is the salon of the Comtesse de Bisaccia, which Coubertin attended (Clastres, p. 103). The Comtesse de Greffuhle might have been a guest at the same event, taking into account that she invited the Comtesse de Bisaccia to her house in 1884 and that the counter-invitation rule was mandatory. In terms of places, Normandy is interesting because the Comtesse owned a house at Dieppe (Weber, pp. 261, 352, 400). Furthermore, this is one of the villages to which the de Coubertin family regularly rode during the stays at Mirville, as Coubertin's father documented in his journal (Camps Y Wilant, 2018b; Klima, 2017; Clastres, 2014, p. 39).

For sure, it might be interesting to analyse Comtesse de Greffuhle's relation to the press, as it might be possible that she supported the publication of some of Coubertin's articles. After all, she was friends with directors of important journals.

In terms of networking activities, these preliminary findings can take up the research done by the sports historians Stephan Wassong and Norbert Müller (2007), who analyzed the Baron's relation to Jules Simon. This paper's findings allow us to set a new focus on the women of his time, their salons and networks. In sum, it can be hoped that future research will

identify "unknown" persons who supported Pierre de Coubertin and his Olympic vision.

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