

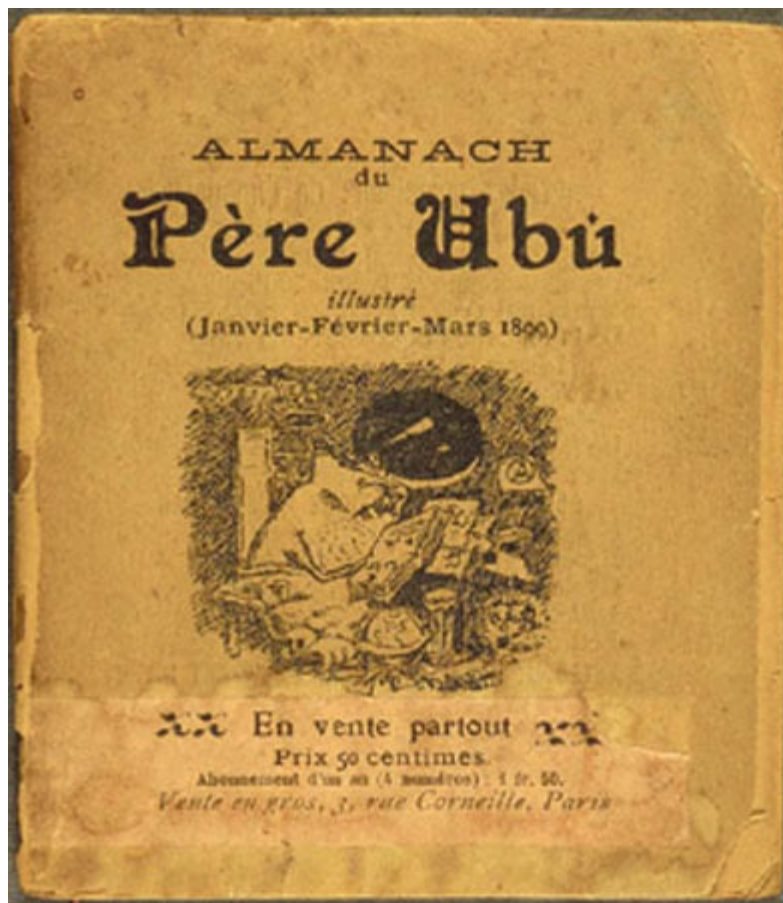
Reading *The Banquet Years*

or

How Can You Read This Book for Fun and Profit without having a Ph.D. in French Literature, History, and History of Art?

Perhaps more than any other reading in this course, *The Banquet Years* elicits the full spectrum of responses. Some students are fascinated by Roger Shattuck's descriptions of the art and life of these rather eccentric artists. Others get lost in his many references to other artists and artistic movements and find the work both confusing and mystifying.

I suspect that the difference between these two reactions arises from the different expectations about the act of reading that the two groups bring to the work. If one reads *The Banquet Years* the way that one might quite effectively read a chemistry textbook, trouble is apt to arise. Below are some of the reasons for this and you can also see an example of what I expect you to when you read the work by clicking on [Reading a Paragraph of *The Banquet Years*:](#)



1) **Shattuck**
is a name
dropper, who goes out of his way to give lists of artists and movements that are only tangentially connected with his subject and are often quite irrelevant to our purposes in this course. It is quite possible to understand the essence of what is being argued without knowing anything about many of these individuals or groups. But, if you begin with the

assumption
that you
cannot
understanding
anything
unless you
understand
everything,
you are apt to
panic and
convince
yourself that
you are
learning
nothing.

2) Shattuck is a story teller, and the essence of a story is in the general pattern, not in the details. When, for example, he writes that “By 1902 he [painter Henri Rousseau] was a ‘celebrity’; one of his jungle paintings was reproduced in the guise of a political cartoon,” the point is not to memorize that this happened in 1902, but rather to provide you some concrete examples that may help you understand the evolving relationship between art and the media and the role of celebrity in twentieth century celebrity.

3) Shattuck sometimes uses technical language in his descriptions of particular works which goes beyond what is expected of you in this course. The point is not for you to understand all the music theory behind Eric Satie's music but rather to grasp some of the ways in which his compositions break with the past

and represent new ideas about art and the role of the artist.

4) Shattuck was not writing this book for this course. He deals with many issues that we will not touch on. You should use the weekly questions on the web site to focus what you are reading. Treat *The Banquet Years* as a kind of lumber yard which will supply some of the materials you need to construct your answers to these questions. Feel free to ignore discussions of issues that don't seem relevant to our purposes.

5) The Banquet Years was written, at least in part, to be enjoyed. Unlike many textbooks some people actually read this work for fun because they enjoy the stories or identify with some aspects of these artists or like the spectacle of life in a different era or find the accounts of the lives of these figures useful (positively or negatively) in deciding how to live their own lives or because they fall in love with the paintings of Rousseau, the



Erik Satie

music of Satie, or the writings of Jarry. If you treat it was a chore, and not an opportunity, you will not be taking advantage of the energy and motivation for reading that exists in the book itself.

6) This book is not being read in a vacuum. You will have access to material in lectures and on the web which can be helpful in understanding this work, and you will have the opportunity to work in class on relating these discussions to the central questions we are considering.

So good luck with *The Banquet Years*. I hope that you all find it fun as well as useful and, perhaps, even enlightening.



Beginning of *Gnossienne No. 4*, composed by Erik Satie on January 22, 1891

[For more on Erik Satie](#)