

Manet and Realism

Background notes

Belle Smith – 12 October 2018



**Henri Fantin-Latour, *Portrait of Manet* 1867,
Art Institute of Chicago**



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Introduction

Following on from thinking about Courbet, in this seminar we are going to look at the work of Edouard Manet born in 1852 and so more than a decade younger. They knew each other and many of the same artists and literary men of their age, and there seems to have been some rivalry between them during the 1860's.

Their work is very different, however. Manet was a Parisian through and through and his art is essentially urban. His family was upper-middle class and comfortably off, and his father expected his son to follow him in to the legal profession. Manet was an unwilling pupil, however, whose only interest was drawing. After a year in the merchant navy his father finally agreed to him enrolling as a pupil of Thomas Couture in 1850.

An artist's training as laid down by the Academie des Beaux-Arts was lengthy and highly prescribed with great emphasis on drawing and painting with a high degree of finish. Couture was a successful artist but Manet was fortunate that he was one of the more unconventional teachers who allowed greater freedom of technique and subject matter, and who placed greater emphasis on retaining freshness and spontaneity. Manet came out of Couture's studio in 1856 with sound training and was well-versed in the art of the past from copying at the Louvre.

The Salon was the biennial and then annual exhibition where an artist needed to show in order to attract critical attention and commissions. Works were selected by a jury made up from members of the Academie which tended to promote a certain conservatism, although this began to change slowly during the 1860's. Although his works were often regarded as shocking in terms of subject matter and technique, Manet persisted in submitting works to the Salon which he considered 'the real field of battle'. We will look at some of his early work including *The Absinthe Drinker* which he submitted to the Salon of 1859 and which was rejected on the grounds of vulgar subject matter.



**Edouard Manet, *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* 1862,
National Gallery London**

He did try many other avenues of exhibiting including a one man show in 1867 to coincide with the Universal Exhibition in Paris. This painting was shown at an independent gallery on the Boulevard des Italiens at the heart of Haussmann's Paris. It shows a fashionable crowd gathered in the Tuileries Gardens for a concert. However this is no ordinary gathering but populated by Manet's friends, family and acquaintances, mostly artists, critics and writers.

Manet himself appears at the very left edge of the painting, as in the Fantin-Latour portrait, every inch the immaculately dressed dandy and flaneur. His dress and manners were a source of some surprise to critics expecting a 'realist' to be a dishevelled bohemian. He loved to stroll the boulevards, hold forth in cafes and these sites of modern entertainment were very much his territory. The flaneur was part of the crowd, but also an observer, maintaining an ironic detachment. In the seminar we will identify the different characters shown here, including the artist's brother, Eugene, and the poet and critic, Charles Baudelaire.

He and Manet were great friends who had met in 1858 and shared many ideas. In an essay published in 1863, *The Painting of Modern Life*, Baudelaire had exhorted artists to abandon the costume dramas so

beloved of the Salon audiences and instead embrace and convey the beauty and heroism of modern life. Conservative critics would have found both the composition and technique shocking. In contrast to subtle tonal shifts Manet's painting makes stark jumps from dark to light with little modelling. Conventionally the centre of a painting should be its focus rather than the curious cream and grey smears here. Most strange of all the foreground figures of the children are unfinished instead of sharp while distant faces can be read with ease. The 'rules' of art are broken to convey the sense of the ebb and flow of modern life: a modern technique for a modern subject.

Manet's works are never straightforward transcriptions of reality and Baudelaire emphasised the transformative process of art. Although they walked in the gardens together and Manet made sketches, most of his works particularly early in his career were produced in the studio and were often the product of considerable repainting while he sought to retain the sense of speed and spontaneity. The palette of blacks and creams with patches of jewelled colour also owes a debt to 17th century Spanish painting which Manet much admired and we will look at some of his Spanish themed works.

Paintings of Women



Edouard Manet, *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* 1863,
Musee D'Orsay

The following year Manet produced two of his most important works and began attracting critical and public attention. The Salon jury was particularly harsh that year rejecting more than half of the works submitted. The Emperor Napoleon III sanctioned a now notorious Salon des Refuses which did provoke considerable mockery. However Manet's painting above, attracted considerable critical attention. Some were startled by a clearly modern young woman naked in the company of clothed men and staring frankly out at the viewer. Others viewed the technique as crude and unfinished, but there were those who were intrigued and marked Manet out as someone to watch. In the seminar we will explore the complex historical sources for the image as well as its powerful originality which has continued to influence artists such as Picasso subsequently.



Edouard Manet, *Olympia* 1863, Musee D'Osay

Shown at the Salon of 1865 Olympia caused almost universal uproar and was undoubtedly a 'success du scandale'. The female nude was a major testing ground for artists and dated back to classical times, usually in the form of Venus or a bathing nymph. They were usually supine and apparently compliant in contemporary Salon offerings. Manet's painting is a dialogue with the art of the past once more but Olympia is upright and alert, naked rather than nude and this is clearly a modern woman. Critics were unanimous that she was a prostitute with her black maid bringing her flowers from a client, but so unconventional was she that they were divided as to whether she was a high class courtesan or common streetwalker. The black cat, representing rampant sexuality quickly became a staple of mocking cartoons about the artist.

We will look at some of the other works where this model Victorine Meurent appears and the beautiful portraits he made of women of his own circle such as the artist Berthe Morisot and his wife Suzanne.

History Painting



**Edouard Manet, *The Execution of Maximilian 1867*,
National Gallery London**

(The painting was cut after Manet's death and remains fragmentary.)

Manet produced few history paintings but when he did he subverted the category just as he subverted the theme of the nude, and grappled with contemporary events. This painting deals with an episode that became a national scandal in 1867. Maximilian had been set up as the puppet ruler of Mexico by Napoleon III who then withdrew all military support, and he was subsequently executed by the troops of the legitimate Government. In an earlier version the firing squad appear to be wearing sombreros but by this painting they are clearly wearing French uniforms implying Napoleon's responsibility. Typically Manet combines a real event with his own ironic comment and a reference to the art of the past, in this case Goya. The painting reveals his staunchly republican views and he was warned that it would never be shown at the Salon. The image of the firing squad appears again in his drawing and prints made during the Commune set up in Paris after the disastrous Franco-Prussian war. This time they stand for the Government troops who entered the city in 1871 and slaughtered vast numbers of Communards.

Cafes and Bars



Edouard Manet, *Corner of a Café Concert* 1878/9 National Gallery London

Manet continued to paint 'la vie moderne' throughout his career, addressing sites of modern entertainment in Haussmann's Paris culminating in the *Bar at the Folies Bergere* finished in 1882 a year before his death at the age of 51. We will explore this painting in detail. His later works such as the one illustrated above with its lighter palette and looser touch, reveal his interaction with Impressionism, particularly the work of Monet. As usual Manet has a clear eye for differences of class and an almost caricatural eye for Parisian 'types'.

Emil Zola who supported Manet in his articles from 1866 interpreted his work as 'natural and straightforward'. While the artist was glad of the positive critical reaction at the time, the art of this 'Dandy of Realism' as the critic Junius dubbed him, was always sophisticated. We will explore a range of his work and try to understand Manet's complex relationship to Realism.

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