

# *Art and Design*

## **Edouard Manet: an Innovator**

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Edouard Manet shook Paris with his innovative paintings and unconventional techniques (Schneider 7). In fact, his paintings consistently shocked artists and viewers alike, as he both followed and strayed from tradition. Described as “witty and sociable,” Manet was said to have “possessed both an infectious humor and a bold streak of independence that made him a natural leader among younger artists” (King 15). Paul Cezanne once admitted that Manet was “responsible for a new state of painting,” while Paul Gauguin said, “Painting begins with Manet” (Schneider 7).

Particularly disturbing to his contemporaries was Manet’s subject matter, which often consisted of allusions to works by the old masters juxtaposed with scenes of modern Parisian life. As if these juxtapositions were not unnerving enough for his viewers, Manet’s paintings were also full of technical errors and absurdities, such as a man wearing two left shoes. In addition, Manet experimented with techniques, often pairing a show of masterful accuracy with blatant disregard for traditional styles.

Born in 1832 to a prominent Parisian family, Manet lived across the Seine River from the Louvre and made routine visits to the museum. Deeply fascinated with the artwork, he dreamed of his own success as an artist. King points out that “Young men with such commendable forebears did not become painters, or so Auguste Manet believed. Instead he had in mind for his eldest son a career in law” (15). Because Manet was resistant to such a career and conveniently lacked skill in all other areas, his father eventually made peace with his son’s artistic aspirations (King 15). Auguste Manet was, however, unaware that his son would leave such a legacy.

It was suggested that if Manet were to pursue painting, he do so at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Run by the government, this school was described by Pierre Schneider as, “the gateway to an almost respectable career” (16). Professors at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts taught their students to paint like the old masters, seeking inspiration from history and religion (Hanson 65). Such paintings

were quite popular in Paris in the 19th century. Manet, however, did not wish to attend a school “where originality and individuality were discouraged, and where students learned anatomy and geometry but not, bizarrely, how to paint” (15). The young artist preferred a more independent and creative environment in which to study.

In seeking a setting with more freedom, Manet began studying under Thomas Couture in 1850 (Schneider 17). Couture, although a previous student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, had more progressive ideas about art. King notes, “Though his own most famous work was . . . a historical tableau showing the moral decline of the Roman Empire, Couture had urged his students to take their subjects from nineteenth-century France” (23). These were, in fact, exactly the sorts of subjects Manet wished to portray, as he was deeply intrigued by the transformation currently sweeping the streets of Paris. Such a teacher seemed a perfect role model for the young artist. It soon became evident, however, that Manet, with such an interest in modern subjects, was too radical an artist, even for Couture (King 16). In fact, Couture and Manet hardly ever saw eye to eye. Schneider admits that, “At heart, Couture’s teaching differed little from the doctrine for the Ecole” (18). After six frustrating years under the direction of Couture, Manet left his studies to paint as he wished.

Manet was not alone in his frustrations, however. Art critic Theophile Gautier once wrote, “Today art has at its disposal only dead ideas and formulas, which no longer correspond to its needs” (Schneider 20). Another insightful art critic, and coincidentally good friend to Manet, Charles Baudelaire, exclaimed, “May the real explorers give us next year the rare joy of hailing the advent of the new” (Schneider 20)!



Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863

Though Baudelaire was unaware at the time, Manet was the something new that Paris would soon see. Manet, however, did not realize his own potential nor did he wish to gain such a title. Instead, "Manet pined for official acclaim" (Schneider 8). In fact, he rather enjoyed visiting museums, such as the Louvre and the Uffizi, to copy the mesmerizing works of the Old masters, even though such activities were reserved for students of the Ecole. Nevertheless, Schneider notes, "If master and pupil had hoped his contact with these revered artists would exorcise the mischievous spirits that plagued Manet, they were soon disappointed" (19).

In his most controversial work, *Olympia* (1863), Manet contrasts the old with the new. In the painting, a nude female figure lounges on a bed. At her feet a black cat arches its back, while to the right a maid presents her with flowers, most likely a gift from a client. Here, Manet blatantly drew inspiration from Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538). Perhaps most shocking was the way in which Manet rendered the female figure in the painting. While nudes were common in paintings, they were offensive unless rendered mythical. Manet's figure is neither rounded nor oblivious to her nude state. Quite the opposite, the figure is realistically portrayed and stares down on the viewer. As Manet desperately sought approval by the public, he was shocked at its viewers' strong dislike of the work.



Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538

Manet received harsh criticism for the work. One critic wrote, "Never has a painting excited so much laughter, mockery, and catcalls as this *Olympia*," while another said, "Here there is nothing, we are sorry to say, but the desire to attract attention at any price" (King 152). One would have been shocked to learn that Manet honestly believed his work would be well regarded, as he so boldly borrowed from the old masters. In fact, "He was obsessively ambitious for conventional recognition . . . and sickened by public ridicule and hostile

press” (Howard 20). Persevering through the criticism, Manet continued to use this recipe of incorporating subject matter and compositions from the Old masters into his works.



Manet, *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863

Another example is Manet’s *Le Dejeuner sur l’herbe* (1863). This scenic picnic featuring two men and two women borrows from a number of masterpieces. Here, most notably, the artist has directly adopted the configuration of the three figures from Raphael’s *Judgment of Paris* (Schneider 34). With both works receiving similarly harsh criticism, Manet was left perplexed. What made these works so shocking was the way in which he juxtaposes the past and the present. This technique forced his viewers to realize that the past was, in fact, the past. As if this realization were not startling enough, Manet incorporated nods to modern life. Schneider notes, “Real life could be used as raw material—although historical subjects were decidedly preferable—but only if its rawer side had been shunned and if the rest had been further filtered by translation into forms derived from the art of the ancients and of the Renaissance painters” (17). In this light, Manet’s paintings were offensive.

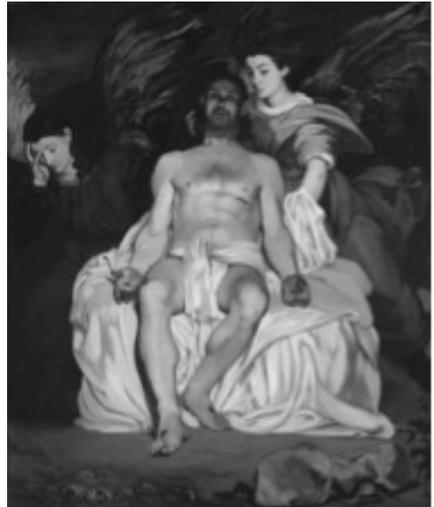


Raphael, *Judgment of Paris*, 1510

Another confusing element in Manet's paintings was not his modern twists on master-pieces, but the small absurdities that he incorporated into his paintings. One can find flaws in any one of his works. Aware of his so-called "blunders," Manet simply stated, "The artist does not say today, 'Come and see faultless works,' but, 'Come and see sincere works'" (Howard 14). A piece more tolerable than others, *Spanish Guitarist* (1860), for example, features a guitar that is strung incorrectly. The figure "plays left-handed on a guitar strung to be played with the right hand" (Seymore). More offensive was Manet's *Dead Christ with Angels* (1864), showing Jesus to have wounds on the wrong side of his chest (Howard 15). Most confusing to viewers was the quite deliberate "flaw" in *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*. The figure to the right of the painting is shown wearing a smoking cap. Notorious for his impeccable fashion sense, Manet certainly understood that a smoking cap was only to be worn indoors and would have known better than to depict such an absurdity (Howard 16). Though these flaws would lead anyone to suspect Manet had a lack of training in technique, it is understood that they were intentional. Laessoe describes the hat to be, "understood as a sign that questions the whole ambience of *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* as an ostensibly outdoor 'luncheon on the grass,' and a sign which, partly at least, tends to locate the scene indoors" (198). Put simply, Manet was experimenting with the formal values of painting, showing that the artist held the ability to control his canvas however he pleases. Howard further explains, "These devices often serve to accent formal values and technical means dramatically; they school the observer in the unique methods of painting—for art's own sake" (17).



Manet, *Spanish Guitarist*, 1860



Manet, *Dead Christ with Angels*, 1864

In continuing his experiments with art's formal values, Manet further infuriated critics and repulsed viewers with his style. Characterized by spontaneity and painterly qualities, his style greatly differed from that taught in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Take for example *Before the Mirror* (1876). As noted by Schneider, the work is made up of "a bevy of brushstrokes, loosely knit, rough, thick" (8). In addition to his unique style, the artist also made his own rules when it came to technique. Such innovation is displayed in Manet's *Absinthe Drinker* (1859), where the artist has impressively shaded the figure's face with a chiaroscuro technique yet curiously excluded the natural highlights and shadows of the glass to the left of the figure (Howard 14). Essentially, Manet followed some stylistic traditions, but blatantly ignored others.



Manet, *Absinthe Drinker*, 1859

Though Manet's art routinely faced harsh criticism during his day, he is now thought to be responsible for the birth of modern art. While other artists in the 19th century strictly followed the traditions of the past, Manet's stylistic innovation and modern subject matter set his work apart. He was, unfortunately, labeled untalented and desperate for attention. In fact, Manet was so disliked in Paris that streetwalkers even created a song, which they sang loudly whenever he walked by. King notes, "That Manet still had the will to face his easel was perhaps something of a miracle" (King 155). Although his artistic genius was not widely recognized until after his death, today Manet's witty works are highly regarded. Said to be the Giotto of the 19th century, it is Manet's stylistic bravery and independent mind, which have elevated his legacy.

### Works Cited

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