Edward Manet was a transitional figure in 19th Century French painting. He bridged the gap between the old classical traditional Realism of the early 1800s and the new, modern style of Impressionism that developed after the mid-1800s. Manet was a great admirer of Spanish painting, especially the works of Velazquez and Goya, and he adopted many of their techniques in his own paintings. His compositions were also influenced by the structure of Japanese prints and by the immediate spontaneity of photography. Other “New Painters,” or avant-garde artists, considered Manet to be their leader and his work greatly influenced many of the Impressionists. Manet, however, never painted a truly Impressionist work. Although he was close friends with many of the Impressionist artists, he followed his own style and refused to be labeled as such; he also refused to participate in any of their group exhibitions.

Manet was a pioneer in depicting modern life and his work generated a growing interest in this new subject matter. He borrowed a lighter palette and freer brushwork from the Impressionists, especially from Berthe Morisot [a fine artist who also happened to be his sister-in-law] and his friend, Claude Monet. However, unlike the Impressionists, he did not abandon the use of black in his painting and he continued to paint in his studio. He refused to show his work in the Impressionist exhibitions, instead preferring to submit his work to the traditional Salon. Manet used strong contrasts and bold colors. His works contained flattened shapes created by harsh frontal lighting and he eliminated tonal gradations of shadow in favor of patches of “pure color.” He painted a variety of everyday subjects, with an emphasis on figures and still life elements.

Manet’s work was the subject of controversy because he portrayed un-idealized nudes realistically in works such as, “Luncheon on the Grass” and “Olympia.” He was rejected by the Salon and criticized by the public. It was not until late in life that Manet finally received the recognition he had longed for throughout his career. His work marked a new era of unsentimental realism, bold new approaches to subject matter, and his use of flat planes of colored shapes paved the way for non-figurative art of the 20th Century.

**Vocabulary**

**Realism**—A style of art that shows objects or scenes accurately, objectively, and without idealization. During the 19th Century, Realism was also an art movement rebelling against traditional classical subjects, favoring instead scenes from modern life.

**Impressionism**—A style of art that originated in 19th Century France that concentrated on the visible changes in light and color. Impressionist artists typically painted outdoors [en plein air] and they used dabs of pure colors and no black when capturing their “impression” of a scene.

**Still life**—A painting or drawing of inanimate objects.

**Art Elements**

**Color**—Color has three properties: hue, which is the name of the color; value, referring to the lightness or darkness of the color; and intensity, referring to the purity of the hue. Primary colors are yellow, red, and blue. Secondary colors are orange, green, and purple. Warm colors appear to advance toward the viewer while cool colors appear to recede in an artwork. Manet painted with a restricted palette of “pure colors,” avoiding intermediate tones or gradations of value. He also used broad areas of color and vividly contrasted light and dark values. Black was very important in his work and he never abandoned its use, as did the Impressionist artists.

**Shape**—Shape is an area contained within an actual or implied line that can be identified because of color or value changes. Shapes are geometric or organic and positive or negative. In a realistic work, the subject is a positive shape and the background is a negative shape. Design in art is basically the planned arrangement of shapes. Manet painted shapes that appeared flat due to harsh frontal lighting. He created shapes by using broad planes of color that stood out because of their vivid contrasts. He would often depict a single positive shape against the negative shape of a solid-color background.

**Art Principles**

**Contrast**—Contrast refers to differences in values, colors, textures, shapes, and other elements that then create visual excitement while adding interest to a work of art. Value contrast is most evident when black is placed next to white. Contrast of color intensity occurs when a pure, intense color is placed next to a muted or grayed color. Shape contrast occurs when positive and negative shapes or geometric and organic shapes are juxtaposed. Manet contrasted negative background shapes with the positive shapes of the subject as well as light values placed against dark values for emphasis.

**Emphasis**—Emphasis is used by artists to create a dominant focus in an artwork. Artists can emphasize color, value, shape, or other elements in order to draw attention to the most important aspect of their work. Placement in the center, isolation, strong value contrasts, shape contrasts, and color dominance can all add emphasis to a focal area. Manet used placement, isolation, and strong contrasts of shape and color in his single-figure compositions; in larger group paintings, he used value, shape, and color contrasts to add emphasis to focal areas.
Edouard Manet, 1832-1883 French Painter

Biography

Edward Manet was born in Paris, France, on January 32, 1832, to a rich and distinguished family. During this time, about 30 years after the French Revolution, an emperor ruled France, but the real power rested firmly with the middle class known as the “bourgeoisie.” Manet’s parents were well-respected members of this bourgeoisie; his father was a judge and his mother was the god-daughter of the Crown Prince of Sweden. They both hoped that their son would someday follow in his father’s footsteps and become a respected lawyer, but Edouard longed to become an artist. As a compromise, in 1848 Manet agreed to join the French Navy as a sea cadet and sailed to South America at the age of 16. But he later failed his naval examinations and so returned home to pursue art, much to the disappointment of his father.

Rather than enrolling in the traditional Ecole des Beaux Arts, Edouard entered the studio of Thomas Couture where he studied until 1856. Manet often disagreed with his teacher about subject matter, style, and technique. At this time in France, there were established rules of traditional painting methods. Subject matter reflected classical Greek and Roman styles, and techniques of painting light and shadow were standardized. In addition, there was a jury of distinguished artists who set the standards for what was considered “good” French art. This group was called the Salon and it held yearly art exhibits that attracted thousands of people. They gave “official” approval to the exhibited art and accepted artists were then given commissions by the French government for future work. Paintings rejected by the Salon became so stigmatized that they were often unsalable because the art dealers of Paris were more often outlets for Salon-approved art. An artist’s ultimate success therefore depended upon receiving Salon approval.

Manet was familiar with the French art collection in the Louvre, and he was particularly influenced by the Louvre’s Galarie Espagnol (“Spanish Museum”) that contained over 400 works of Spanish artists such as Velázquez, Murillo, and Goya. After leaving the studio of Thomas Couture, Manet visited Madrid; he also toured other museums of Europe and admired the work of the Dutch painter, Franz Hals. Manet developed his own style of painting that owed a great deal to the old masters, but with a focus on the images of the modern city of Paris. He dispensed with the old sentimental storytelling of the classical style and replaced it with a realistic naturalism. Instead of a dramatic pose and a central event, Manet painted the ordinary modern world in a spontaneous manner. He found his subjects among contemporary Parisian life—on the streets, in the cafés, gardens, parks, and even at the horse races—and he painted simplified shapes with bold color and brushwork.

Manet’s loose painting techniques and his depictions of everyday subjects alarmed the traditional Salon jurists as well as the bourgeoisie. In 1859, the Salon rejected Manet’s first submission, The Absinthe Drinker, but in 1861, the Salon did award him honorable mentions for a painting of his parents and for a portrait of a guitar player entitled, The Spanish Singer, as both were judged to be acceptable subjects. Manet painted genre subjects such as an old beggar, street urchins, cafe characters, and he also depicted touring Spanish bullfight scenes. These works realistically portrayed the darker aspects of real Parisian life, however, and the critics and public neither understood nor accepted them.

The years 1863-1865 were key years in Manet’s career. During this time, he suffered intense confrontations with the public and the Salon. Manet valued and strived to gain Salon approval but when he submitted Luncheon on the Grass in 1863 and Olympia in 1865, both paintings were not only rejected, but each caused great public scandal. Although both works depicted nudes and each was based on admired and accepted classical themes created by earlier artists, Manet’s realistic portrayal of ordinary naked women without idealization left his audience shocked and repulsed.

The Salon jury of 1863 was exceptionally brutal: of 5,000 submissions, they rejected more than 2,800. When the rejected artists protested vehemently, the Emperor Napoleon III finally ordered that all rejected works would have their own exhibition. Thus, the Salon des Refusés [the Salon of the Refused] was held nearby and many more people actually rushed to see the “rejected” show than visited the official Salon exhibition. The bourgeoisie came especially to gawk at Manet’s newest painting, Luncheon on the Grass. Because of this scandalous work, Manet found himself suddenly thrust into the position as leader of the anti-establishment artists, those labeled the avant-garde or “New Painters” of the French art world.

Younger artists saw Manet as an admirable pioneer and they began to gather around him. Known as “Manet’s gang,” several, including the artists Fantin-Latour, Degas, and Bazille regularly joined Manet at the Café Gerbois for animated discussions about new, modern art. Bazille also brought along other artists—Monet, Renoir, and Sisley. Even recluse, Cézanne, and the older Pissarro joined the group discussion on occasion. These friends would soon be known as Impressionists and although Manet enjoyed their friendship and admiration, he never painted in a truly Impressionistic style nor had any wish to join their artistic group. He would also become annoyed whenever some critic confused him with his friend, the Impressionist Claude Monet.
Edouard Manet, 1832-1883 French Painter

In 1874, the Impressionists decided to hold an exhibition in the studio of the famous photographer known as Nadar [Gaspard Félix Tournachon]. Manet refused their invitation to participate and focused on once again submitting his work to the Salon. Although he never exhibited in any of the eight Impressionist exhibitions, he still maintained close friendships with many of the artists. He joined Monet and Renoir in Argenteuil during the summer of 1874, and worked so closely with them that he actually started several of his paintings en plain air! Manet always returned to the studio, however, to finish these works because he simply did not share the Impressionist’s interest in the changing light nor would he abandon the use of black in his paintings. He cared about his artist friends and always managed to give them financial support whenever some of the artists with families needed it. Berthe Morisot was not only his sister-in-law but a talented and respected Impressionist artist in her own right. She decorously posed as a model in several of Manet’s works and it was she who finally convinced him to lighten his palette a bit and to free up his brushwork.

In the early 1850s, Manet had begun a discreet, long-standing relationship with his former piano teacher, Suzanne Leenhoff. She was Dutch and several years older than Manet. They finally married in 1863 but only after Manet’s father died; he never learned of their affair and would not have approved of their relationship if he had known about it. Suzanne brought with her a young boy, Leon Koëlla, who had been born in 1852. Suzanne claimed the he was her younger brother although many today believe that Leon was probably Manet’s son. Leon can be seen as the central figure in Manet’s painting, *Luncheon in the Studio*.

Political events between 1867-1871 were turbulent: in 1867, France withdrew military forces supporting the flimsy empire of Maximilian, briefly the Emperor of Mexico. Maximilian was captured by the Mexicans and shot. France then challenged Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 which resulted in French Emperor Napoleon III’s defeat. Paris remained under siege until 1871 and experienced even more terror during the brief Commune of Paris. Manet observed it all and produced several observant works, such as *The Execution of Maximilian*, *Civil War*, and *The Barricade*. Manet sent his family south to protect them from the unrest and fighting in Paris and he signed on as a gunner in the National Guard. He continued to paint and seek acceptance from the Salon but received mostly public criticism and Salon rejections in return. Toward the end of his life, however, an old friend, Antonin Proust, in his role as the newly-appointed Minister of Fine Arts, saw to it that Manet finally received the French Legion of Honor.

In 1882, Manet’s last great masterpiece, *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, was exhibited at the Salon. This scene from the modern world of Parisian nightlife exemplified Manet’s philosophy of life and art. Although he had finally achieved the peak of his career, he was now very ill, frequently collapsing from the fatigue, weakness, and extreme pain caused by locomotor ataxia, a syphilitic disorder of the nervous system. He was soon confined to his studio and then to the dining room of his home where he struggled to paint small watercolor and pastel still lifes and portraits, because these materials were easier to use. During his final weeks, the circulation in his legs failed, causing gangrene in his left foot. The doctors were forced to amputate, but he continued to decline and died at the age of 51 on April 30, 1883. He left behind 430 oil paintings and a reputation for recording modern Parisian life in his own style, however controversial that it was for the time.

Bibliography:


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