Edouard Manet (1832-1883)

The Reluctant Revolutionary



Written by Ryan Janowski

The great painter Edgar Degas was famous for how strongly he despised Manet as a person; upon the death of the latter in 1883, Degas remarked: “We did not know that he was this great.” Even his enemies recognized his influence, talent, and scope as an artist. Paul Cezanne, a master in his own right, declared that Manet began “a new state of painting.” Paul Gaugin, whose works are among the most-prized in the modern century, stated outrightly that “Painting begins with Manet.” He is undoubtedly a revolutionary, ushering in the Impressionist style like no other painter – yet his goals were not at all along the lines of his achievements. If he was a revolutionary, he was a reluctant one. Disdained by many of his fellow painters for being a member of the bourgeois, Manet has fallen from being a household name, outshadowed by Degas, Renoir, Monet, and Cassatt – all of whom are very talented artists, and all of whom owe much to him.

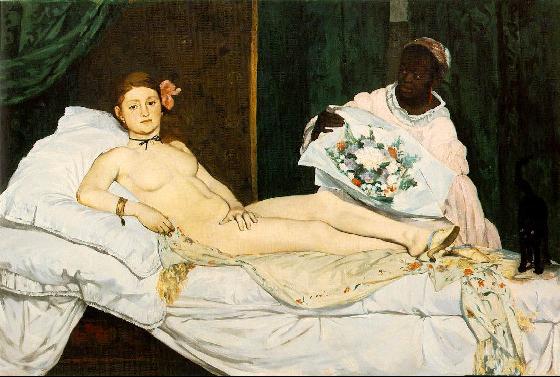
Manet was born into a Paris of revolution and chaos – the nineteenth century was not kind to France, delivering government that constantly fluctuated from the radical Republican to the conservative Monarchial, and everything in-between. His lifetime would see the invention of the steam engine and the photograph; vaccinations and x-rays; the machine gun and the submarine. He was born into a society that would put the utmost importance on social order and class; he died in one that was tearing itself to shreds as morality became simultaneously dropped and emphasized, depending on who you talked to. He would be the greatest artist in France, and the worse. Critics loved, and hated him. By the time he painfully passed away, in 1883, his followers would move on – and so, eventually, would the world. He didn’t try to change forever painting. But he did.

 Pre-Manet, the predominant style was Neo-Classical – established four centuries ago by Giotto and his cronies, and held onto ever since. Nudity was of the heroic nature, with an emphasis on making the human body as idealized as possible. Scenes of classical Roman and Greek myths were common, as were stiff and formal portraits, and historical portrayals. More recently, Romanticism had come into play, with an emphasis on the natural world and an idealized past. Attention was (for the most part – there were some exceptions, like the magnificent J. M. W. Turner) placed on line and form rather than color; color was used to augment, rather than define.

[](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4c/Goya_Maja_naga2.jpg)[](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4c/Manet_-_Musique_aux_Tuileries_rep.jpg)In 1853, Manet visited the Netherlands (always a holdout from conservative and orthodox views), where he was exposed to some of the more radical paintings of Goya and Velazquez. He was evidently inspired by these works, particularly Goya’s *La maja desnuda* (see below left), and when he returned to Paris in 1856, he opened up his owns studio. His works at this time were characterized by loose brushstrokes and simplification of line and detail, as well as the depiction of the Parisian upper-middle class at various social events (see *Music in the Tuileries*, below right). All of these were rather daring and new – but no one was taking much notice of Edouard Manet.

[](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f1/Manet,_Edouard_-_Le_D%C3%A9jeuner_sur_l'Herbe_(The_Picnic)_(1).jpg)All that changed with Manet’s next major picture. *The Luncheon on the Grass* (1863) quite frankly *shocked* Parisian society – the Salon (the institution that showed artworks from major artists around Paris) rejected it immediately, noting that “This is a young man’s practical joke, a shameful open sore not worth exhibiting.” The French are not widely renowned for their sensitivities. Fortunately for Manet and the other 9,000 artists rejected that year, Emperor Napoleon III ordered that a second show would be held, with all of the works rejected by the Salon. There, the Luncheon on the Grass (see below) debued – and set society on fire. Most people hated it, for the subject was scandalous, the form far too insubstantial, and the content defined by color rather than line. Many suspected he had painted it for the sole purpose of causing scandal – an accusation that would have horrified Manet, who was a bit of a dandy himself.

Manet, with an eye for accidentally creating scandals unparalleled in art history, submitted a painting to the Salon in 1865. Interestingly, given the controversy over his previous works, they selected him; also interestingly (but somewhat less happily for poor Edouard), it became the centerpiece of the exhibition – and the mockery of (most of) Paris. In modern times, *Olympia* (1863) is hailed as one of the greatest works of art of the nineteenth century, and rightly so. The Parisians declined to agree: one report stated that “An epidemic of wild laughter prevails in front of the canvases by Manet.”



With retrospect, it is easy to admire the realism with which Manet portrays his subject, the details – rendered in color, rather than line – that give clues into her life: the Oriental shawl she reclines on, the bouquet sent by a customer. Depicting a prostitute – especially in the nude – was unconventional to say the least, but here the sexuality of the subject is cut by her frank and challenging gaze. The unparalleled situating of the painting – while still portraying depth and dimensionality – creates a space that is extremely shallow, destroying the traditional box-like perspective of the Neo-Classical painting. The harsh realism on the painting of the figure – she is not pretty – gives this picture a breathtaking quality almost unmatched in the history of Western Art.

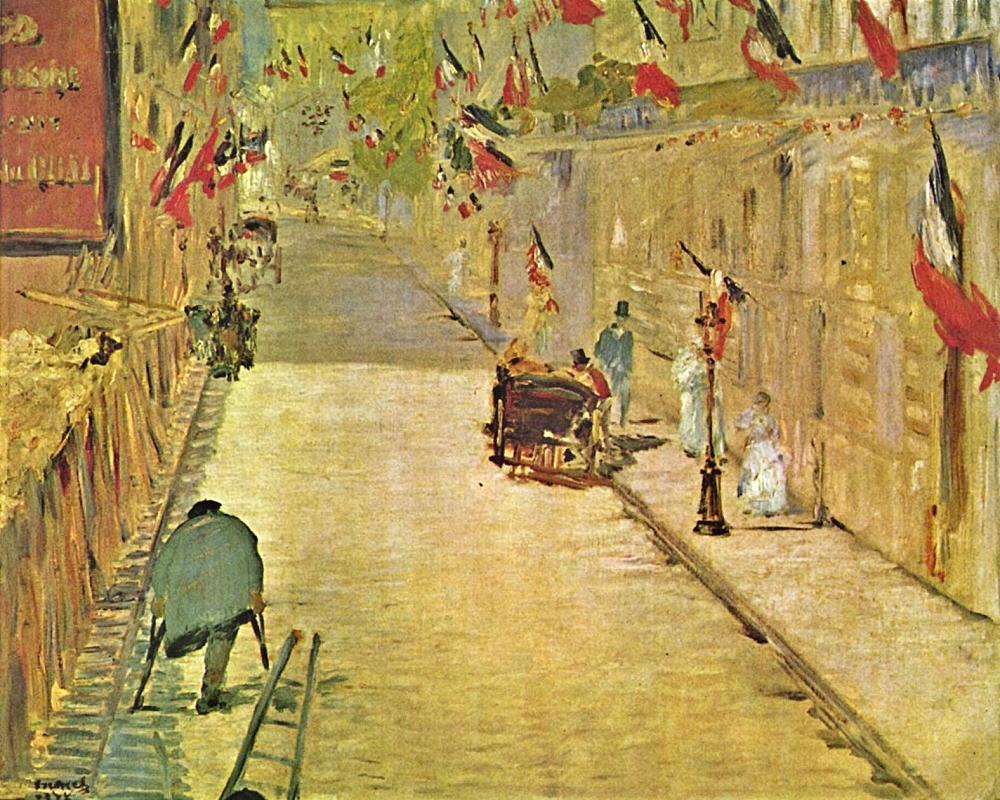
Manet became the unofficial leader of a group consisting of Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Paul Cézanne and Camille Pissarro – all of whom were Impressionists in their artworks. Interestingly, Manet never considered himself to be part of the artistic movement he founded – he painted mostly in studios (rather than *plein air*), many of his paintings were portraits (including one often described as his best), and he constantly and consistently used black, all of which were traits that separated himself from the radical and revolutionary group. Nonetheless, he became great friends with them, particularly Monet and Renoir, and often would travel to the village of Argenteuil (just outside of Paris) to paint together. It was there that the influence of the younger artists can be seen the most, particularly in his bright treatment of the water and garments of *Argenteuil* (1874) – not his most successful painting.



Many would argue that that honor belongs to one of the last paintings Manet ever did: *Bar at the Folies-Bergere* (1881), a disturbingly contradictory piece that brings out many of the differences between Manet and the true Impressionists. Most prominent is the use of black: in the dress, in the décor, in the crowd – Manet revels in the color that the Impressionists eschewed, and he does it well. The sad-eyed barmaid is standing in front of a mirror, reflecting the room behind the viewer’s perspective – but the perspective of the man she is facing (in the mirror) does not match up with reality. The bowl of oranges carries a sinister, brownish cast – and a lady at the forefront of the crowd is impossibly pale. The work is reminiscent of the twentieth century surrealists, yet there is no parallel in any other works by Manet. The essential quality of the painting is captured in the color: of the bottles, of the barmaid’s skin, of the crowd in the mirror. Coming at the end of Manet’s life, this painting is both a reflection of his great talent and his occasional bouts of depression (which is, I believe, a requirement to become a great painter).

But one of the greatest works by Manet is, perhaps, one of the more obscure ones: *Berthe Morisot with a Bunch of Violets*, 1872. Here we again see Manet’s differences with the Impressionists: this is undoubtedly a formal portrait, and it makes widespread use of black. Here the use of light makes the portrait come alive in a way that can only be compared to the masterpieces of Vermeer: the subtle shadows on the wall behind, the masterful handling of the two-tone chin, and the slivered crescent of white along the ridge of the nose all point to the work of an undisputed master. The image is neither passive nor boring; it is **bold** without being aggressive – mainly by the use of black, which highlights the subtle features of the face, framed by the bonnet and wisps of chestnut hair. Despite the fact that this is a studio portrait – again, another difference between Manet and the true Impressionists – the picture retains a fresh and spontaneous quality, partly due to the urgent brushstrokes of the hair and unfinished quality of the wall behind her. The eyes are done as simply as possible, yet retain an element of realism that marks all of the works of Manet. Rarely is a painter able to input such personality and life into a portrait.



Perhaps the most poignant of Manet’s paintings is his *Rue Mosneir Decked with Flags* (1878), a picture of national revelry rendered quiet and disenchanted by the addition of a lone crippled man. The golden handling of the overall scene is rather reminiscent of some of the earlier works by Renoir, and the brushstrokes – long and striated – owe more to Monet than Manet. Like the *Bar*, this painting is quietly disturbing – a social commentary, one guesses, with the juxtaposition of a national holiday and the forgotten cripple.

It is said that photography is, in essence, capturing a moment in time. This is true – but that is all photography is. The moment is still the moment; it has no life on its own. Photography is a reminder of something else – often a highly skilled, thoughtful reminder, but a reflection nonetheless. Painting, though – painting is to breathe life into a moment in time. The best paintings have a life and vibrancy all of their own, living beyond the mere subject matter. Removed from context, a painting still carries meaning, even in the very physical aspects of the work: the subject matter, the brushstrokes, the colors. Only the most skilled of painters are able to make their work breathe. Edouard Manet was one of those painters.