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Holly McGuire

Lindenwood University

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Olympia, Reinventing the Nude

Holly McGuire

Professor Hutson

ART 354

November 30, 2010

Manet's modernist depiction of the female nude as seen in *Olympia* (Figure 1) sent shockwaves throughout the art world and forever changed the way we view nudes. Camille Lemonnier described the nude as such in 1870 "The nude was modesty only if it is not a transitory state. It hides nothing because there is nothing to hide. The moment it hides something it becomes prurient, for in reality it shows it all the better. In order to stay virgin the nude in art must be impersonal and must not particularize; art has no need of a beauty spot upon the neck or a mole on the hindquarters. It hides nothing and shows nothing: it makes itself seen as a whole..."¹. Breaking from this view of nudes, Manet created *Olympia* from the inspiration of a live model, but also portrayed her in a way in which she is hiding herself from the viewer in an almost shameful manner. Manet freed himself from the strict techniques and structures of the classical nude to create the female body as he saw it, driven by both imperfection and sexual implication. Olympia exudes both masculine and feminine characteristics that, when combined, leave an uneasy and almost grotesque feeling with the viewer. In this way Olympia is seen as less than a woman because of what she *does* with and *how* she displays her sexuality. Perhaps the most offensive quality of the painting may not be the image itself but the realistic light in which it is painted, as Manet said of the painting "I painted what I saw"². By covering herself, some suggest that this is the cause of most if not all of the painting's offensive nature.¹ "Sex is not something evident and all of a piece in Olympia (Figure 1); that a

¹ T.J Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life, Revised Edition*, (1999), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), **128-129**

² Patricia Wright, *Manet*, (1993), (New York: Dorling Kindersley, Inc., 1993), **28**

woman has a sex at all-and certainly *Olympia* has one-does not make her immediately *one thing*, for a man to appropriate visually; her sex is a construction of some kind, perhaps the inconsistency of several”¹.

Manet’s artistic aspirations were not always welcomed with open arms. Auguste Manet, who suggested instead that a naval career would better suit Edouard’s upbringing and family background, met the news of his son’s interest in art with heavy criticism. In an effort to solidify his future ambitions, Manet spent six months in Rio de Janeiro, confirming his artistic drive. “On his return, Manet’s career as a painter began. In 1850 he registered as a copyist in the Louvre and as a student at Thomas Courture’s studio”². Manet drew inspiration and ideas from some of the great masterpieces of the time, including works by Delacroix, Titian and Courture. As common of budding artists in the 1800s and “regarded as an essential part of a young painters training, Manet made direct and thorough copies in front of old masters”². Seeing how Courture separated himself from the Ecoles, it is under his teaching that Manet may have developed his rebellious and modernistic approach to painting. It has been noted that Manet often challenged Courture’s teachings, however Manet’s art did reflect many of Courture’s beliefs. Manet was a student of Courture’s until he left to establish a studio of his own in the rue Laboisier. Manet’s first submission to the Salon, his painting *The Absinthe Drinker*, was criticized and quickly rejected by the panel.² “This disappointment marked

¹ T.J Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life, Revised Edition*, (1999), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), **132**

² Patricia Wright, *Manet*, (1993), (New York: Dorling Kindersley, Inc., 1993), **6, 8**

the beginning of Manet's lifelong quest for recognition through and from the Paris Salons. At that time, the Salon was virtually the only real opportunity available to artists to show their work; the few private galleries that were in Paris rarely mounted exhibitions, and no other artist's forum existed"². Though he was disappointed by the rejection from the Salon, he took comfort in the fact that he had gained the interest of other great artists.³ "Ah, [Courtine] had turned me down", Manet declared. "What he must have said about it, in front of the other high priests of his ilk. But what consoles me is that Delacroix found it good. For, I have been told, Delacroix did find it good. He's a different customer from Courtine, Delacroix. I don't like his technique. But he's a gentleman who knows what he wants and makes it clear. That's something."³ Manet drew much inspiration from the daily activities and city life, which he observed almost daily as he walked the streets of Paris.³ The city excited him, he was quoted as saying "It's not possible to live anywhere else"³ The rejection he felt became the driving force that would continue to push him to create the art *he* wanted to.³ Manet's artistic intuition and disregard for public opinion is what gained him "support so enthusiastically and by such great names as Delacroix and Baudelaire, Zola and Mallarme, Degas and Monet. Degas summed up the general view when he said at Manet's funeral 'He was greater than we ever thought'⁴. Manet was seen to be in the great tradition of Titian, Frans Hals and

² Patricia Wright, *Manet*, (1993), (New York: Dorling Kindersley, Inc., 1993), **12**

³ Henri Lallemand, *Manet A Visionary Impressionist*, (1994), (New York: SMITHMARK Publishers Inc., 1994), **5, 11**

⁴ Françoise Cachin, *Manet*, (1990), (New York: Henry Holt and Company Inc., 1990), **11**

Velazquez, and at the same time one of the first modern painters: a master of materials, colour simplification but also of subject matter- he was the first social and artistic witness of the Paris of his time”⁴

Nudes in the Salon up until the 1860s were regarded as pieces that embodied the painter’s ability to capture values which were emphasized during the time including innocence, fidelity, domestic virtues, etc. Critics of the time agreed that a part of the nudes appeal was erotic.¹ “There was nothing necessarily wrong in that, they insisted; it was part of the strength of their beloved ‘pagan ideal’ that it offered a space in which woman’s body could be consumed without too much (male) prevarication”¹. Each nude had a specific function and for the most part, many painters followed a strict structural format that allowed them to continue in the academic nature of painting nudes.¹ “The main business of the nude was to make a distinction between these figures and nakedness itself: the body was attended and to some extent threatened by its sexual identity, but in the end the body was triumphed. The painter’s task was to construct or negotiate a relation between the body as particular and excessive face- that flesh, that contour, those marks of modern woman- and the body as a sign, formal and generalized, meant for a token of composure and fulfillment. Desire appeared in the nude, but it was shown displaced, personified, no longer an attribute of the woman’s unclothed form”¹. The paintings of classical nudes were not the inspiration of a true model, but an idealized and

¹ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life Revised Edition*, (1999), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), **123, 128, 129**

fantasy like version of what humans possess. The nude was not painted as a woman who was offering her body to the viewer in an erotic way or acting as a suggestive being. The nude is merely meant to draw the viewer in and represent the glorification of the human form. The Salon and many art critics drew fine lines between the nude and the *undressed*.¹ As Camille Lemonnier described it “The nude has something of the purity of little children who play naked together without minding at all. The *undressed*, on the contrary, always reminds me of the woman who shows herself off for forty sous and specializes in ‘artistic poses’”¹. Artists’ struggle in concealing the nude’s sexual identity and provocative nature came to a head in the 1860s. At this time, critics agreed that the nude as a genre was in a “precarious and confused state. The confusion of the genre centered, or so the critics said, on matters of propriety and desire, and the fact that there seemed so little agreement about either”¹. What the critics feared the nude losing was its innocence. They feared the painter’s inability to create a nude as a glorified depiction of the human form, one free from specific and detailed human characteristics that inevitably qualified it to have an oversexed and explicit nature. In losing this, the nudes would not only lose their innocence but their fantastical nature for which they were ultimately created.¹ At this time of turmoil, the art world was beginning to lose its grip on its

¹ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life Revised Edition*, (1999), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), **123, 128, 129**

understanding that the nude “is the place in which the body is revealed, given its attributes, brought into order, and made out to be unproblematic”¹. The feat they faced, which proved to be too much to overcome, was separating the body from the sex, which “her sex, one might say, is a matter of *male* desire”¹. Manet succeeded in contributing to, and perhaps being the cause of, leading the painting of nudes as a genre to being re-evaluated and reinvented by using a live model as the inspiration for *Olympia*² (Figure 1).

Victorine Meurent became Manet’s favorite model, and the inspiration of one of his most controversial works, *Olympia*. Thomas Courture used Meurent as a model in his studio when she was only eighteen years of age, however Manet had already left Courture’s studio by that time. “According to his friend Theodore Duret, Manet first met Victorine in 1862, ‘by chance in a crowd in a room in the Palais de Justice [and] have been struck by her original and distinctive appearance”². Manet found Victorine an irresistible fit for his style of painting “her fair, creamy skin and red hair caught the light well”³. “Meurent’s distinctive coloring was perfectly suited to Manet’s ‘blond’ palette”². Meurent possessed the essence of a woman who knew what she wanted and how to get it, which inevitably scared most men of the time. The presence that Victorine exuded permeated Manet’s paintings in a way that was inarguably the cause and center of much discussion around his most famous works. At the time many scholars and art critics used

² Patricia Wright, *Manet*, (1993), (New York: Dorling Kindersley, Inc., 1993), **20**

³ Henri Lallemand, *Manet A Visionary Impressionist*, (1994), (New York: SMITHMARK Publishers Inc., 1994), **23**

harsh words and judgment to describe Edouard's most prized model.⁵ Adolphe Tabarant was noted as saying such about Meurent "[She was] like a lot of girls of the lower classes who knew they were beautiful and unable to easily resign themselves to misery. She immediately consented to model"⁵. However it is noted that Victorine was not as one-dimensional as the critics wrote her to be.² "Meurent was known as a 'fantastic character' who played with the guitar and who could also paint (she later exhibited in the 1875 Salon when Manet's own works were rejected, and again in 1897). She was to enjoy a dubious kind of fame in her role as the naked courtesan *Olympia*, and her grace under the pressure of the attention she received from the press, as Manet's model, attests to her strength of character"². Victorine Meurent personified all of the characteristics Manet craved in able to create a piece that showed the raw and unforgiving realness of the human flesh combined with its natural sexual exuberance.

Art critic, Felix Deriege wrote of *Olympia*, "is lying on her bed having borrowed from art no ornament but a rose which she has put in her towlike hair. This redhead is of a perfect ugliness. Her face is stupid, her skin cadaverous. She does not have a human form; Monsieur Manet has so pulled her out of joint that she could not possibly move her arms or legs. By her side one sees a Negress who brings in a bouquet and at her feet a cat who wakes and has a good stretch, a cat with hair on end, out of a witch's Sabbath by Callot. White, black, red, and yellow make a frightful confusion on this canvas. The woman, the Negress, the bouquet, the cat, all this hubbub of disparate colours and

⁵ Eunice Lipton, *Alias Olympia*, (1992), New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 5

² Patricia Wright, *Manet*, (1993), (New York: Dorling Kindersley Inc., 1993), 20

impossible forms, seize one's attention and leave one stupefied"¹. *Olympia* fell under such harsh words and criticism by the art world because it strayed so far from the classical nude in almost every aspect of the genre.¹ Manet was seemingly laughing in the faces of the Academy by producing a work that could not be mistaken for its realistic nature and implications. There are many aspects of the painting that confused and offended most who first viewed the painting. Manet drew inspiration from Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Manet's *Olympia* (Figure 1) can be seen as a modern interpretation of Titian's work.¹ Edouard captured the reclining nature of the Venus in *Olympia*. "The similarities with Titian's Venus end there, however, and in place of his rather coy, passive goddess is a coolly self-assured Olympia. No longer Venus in the guise of the courtesan, this is the courtesan triumphing as a modern Venus"². The first and most direct difference we find Olympia to possess that the classical nude did not is her uninviting gaze at the viewer.¹ "A nude could hardly be said to do its work as a painting at all if it did not find a way to address the spectator and give him access to the body on display"¹. This is clearly seen in Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. The Venus is offering herself to the viewer in a "dreamy offering of self, that looking which was not quite looking: those were the nude's most characteristic forms of address"¹. Contrasting this, *Olympia* possesses a cold outward

¹ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life Revised Edition*, (1999), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), **97-98**

² Patricia Wright, *Manet*, (1993), (New York: Dorling Kindersley Inc., 1993), **29**

¹ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life Revised Edition*, (1999), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), **132, 133, 134**

gaze that instead of being generalized was thought to be the uncertainty and unwillingness of the model herself. Olympia's stare holds more than just the face of a nude, it contains elements which circled around the life of a particular modern woman.¹ "Olympia, on the other hand, looks out at the viewer in a way which obliges him to imagine a whole fabric of sociality in which this look might make sense and include him- a fabric of offers, places, payments, particular powers, and status which is still open to negotiation"¹. Olympia's stare seems to be almost a separate entity from her body as a whole. The jarring lines of Olympia's body led many critics to make these observations of the nude,¹ "the picture is *lacking* definition. It was 'unfinished.' After all, and drawing 'does not exist' in it; it was described as 'impossible' or evasive or 'informe'¹. A second scandalous detail which Manet included in the painting is the placement of Olympia's hand. In *Venus of Urbino*, we find "the hand seemingly coinciding with the body, enacting the lack of the phallus and disguising it. In that sense- in that particular and atrocious detail- Olympia was certainly scandalous. Her hand enraged and exalted the critics as nothing else did, because it failed to enact the lack of the phallus"¹. The critics agreed that Olympia's hand demanded the attention of the viewer and represented the disobedience of the nude Manet was exhibiting.¹ "Although the gesture is a conventional one, the reason why the woman covers herself with her hand is hardly

¹ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life Revised Edition*, (1999), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 135

chaste- you, the viewer, in the position client, have not paid to see her”⁶. There are other key elements that Manet included in the painting which added to the impact of the viewer’s inability to accept the painting at the time. The black maid who appears from the shadows “brings flowers from a client, although they give the woman no pleasure, while crossing the bed is a black cat, a traditional symbol of sexual activity”⁶. The contrast of the dark of the curtains and the pale coloring of Olympia’s body accentuates her nakedness and the black tie around her neck serves as reinforcement of her state.¹

Manet broke the mold when he created *Olympia* and by doing so, he offered a modern way to view the nude. The determining factor that set Manet’s piece apart from all others at the time was his ability to capture Victorine’s character, emotions and almost shocking consciousness of herself. Combined, Manet depicted a look that has haunted viewers from the very first glimpse they experience. The realness of his painting allows the viewer into a world that was not easily accepted or accessible to the bourgeois of the day. Manet and his work have been applauded as the first of its kind. Inspired by the likes of Courture, Delacroix, and Titian, Manet is a true Modernist artist. *Olympia* has stood the test of time. Her gaze continues to draw the viewers in with her cold, unapologetic stare, demanding attention.

⁶ Antonia Cunningham, *Essential Impressionists*, (2000), (United Kingdom: Parragon Publishing, 2001), **22**

¹ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life Revised Edition*, (1999), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), **135**

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TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 1 *Olympia*, Edouard Manet, 1863, Paris, Louvre.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 2 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538.

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