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Recommended Citation

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Manet's *Olympia*: Changing the Way People View the Nude

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ART 387

January 22, 2013

The nude was the epitome of art in the late 1800s in France. They had to follow set rules in order to be considered “art” and not, as the subject depicted, courtesans. Nudes typically were represented as either goddesses or women in historical stories. Modernists were known for seeing things differently than the rest of the artistic community, including when considering nude paintings. Edouard Manet (1832-1883), the “Father of Modernism”, was not interested in idealizing the female form. He is known for challenging ideas that the bourgeoisie thought to be fact. He showed the nude for what she really was, to the horror of the public, a naked prostitute being paid to sit still. Much to the discomfort of the public, Manet paints his nudes without a mythological veil to cover their hideously human forms.

In nineteenth-century France, the female nude was everywhere, like Clark stated, “for the nineteenth century... painting was the nude.”¹ As a nude, she had very specific roles she was to fulfil: sometimes she would take form as a goddess, like Venus being born from the sea; sometimes she was merely a woman who, for a long time, had only existed in the memory of history. Nude paintings were very popular in the period and were seemingly innocuous. Though she was without clothing, families could walk past the paintings and look on them without shame. If she were well portrayed, she would peek at them through her raised arm, in a *contrapposto* stance, and would be adored by women and men alike. However, if she happened to veer off the fine line of what was appropriate, she would be rebuked for her sexuality and accused of being a woman who is in wait of a rich man. Nudes had very strict guidelines that they could not break if they wished to be accepted by the Salon, the public, and critics.

Nudes were never supposed to make people uncomfortable when they looked at the art. As

¹ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.), 94

a way of removing people from the fact that they were naked, the nude was to appear in situations that would have been normal for them to not wearing clothing; women in historical events, mythologic events, and goddesses were all allowed to appear nude. Taking a woman out of the current period allowed her to embody an idea, and not represent a real person that could be seen on the streets of Paris. Jean-Leon Gerome's *Phryne devant l'Areopage* (Figure 1) is a painting of a courtesan that was brought before an ancient Greek court. It was socially accepted at the time, even though she was a naked prostitute, because it was an historical event and no longer threatening. In a similar fashion, the birth of Venus was a very common scene that was depicted, where she appeared nude, lying or standing on the ocean. A scene of a woman standing on the ocean with cupids could not be mistaken for anything other than a goddess. Clark argues that because she was a goddess and not a naked mortal woman, she was appropriate to look at.²

These women were always posed in such a way that would be pleasing to the male eye. They usually would be in a *contrapposto* stance, with their bodies in a seductive S-shape; sometimes they would have their arm raised as to expose the armpit and would try to hide their nude bodies. When a Venus tried to cover herself, she was known as a *venus pudica*, or a "modest" venus. In the attempt at covering herself, she ends up drawing more attention to her exposed body. It was important that though she was meant to titillate men, she was not to have any genitalia. The nude was to have breasts, but no hair (other than that on her head) and no vagina. The lack of genitalia and body hair helps to distance her further from reality. While she is sexually appealing, she cannot have sex.

Manet knew the requirements for a critically acceptable nude, being classically trained by

² Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 127-128

Thomas Couture (1815-1879). He had the ability and the knowledge to make a nude that would be warmly welcomed by the public. However, he had an overwhelming urge to shock the public. His first truly scandalous painting was painted in 1863, *The Bath*, later renamed *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* (Figure 2), a picture of a nude woman sitting between two fully clothed men with a woman bathing in the background. Her clothing is strewn about her, mixed with the food that has fallen from the picnic basket. She stares directly at the viewer, making it impossible to ignore her. When Manet was talking to a friend about this piece, he said, "It appears that I have to paint a nude. Well, I will paint one in transparency of the air, with people like those you see down there. The public will tear me to pieces, but they can say what they like!"³

The public did not receive it well. This woman had broken out of their contrived rules for what a nude should look like: she was neither a goddess or from history; she was a real woman, sitting with real men that the bourgeoisie knew. She stares at the viewer, unapologetic of her nakedness. Manet always claimed to paint what he saw.⁴ He did the same in this piece as well, painting Victorine Meurent (the nude woman) exactly how he saw her. She was in an unflattering pose, one that emphasizes rolls on her stomach and on her neck. Manet did not try to alter her appearance, because he was not painting a goddess; he was painting a naked woman having a picnic. There was no need for her to have a slimmer form, as she was just an average woman and not some perfect being out of the myths.

Manet presented *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* as a modern twist on Titian's *Concert Champetre* (Figure 3). In *Concert Champetre*, there are two fully clothed men with two nude

³ Pierre Courthion, *Manet*. (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1953.), 74

⁴ Sharon Flescher, "More on a Name: Manet's 'Olympia' and the Defiant Heroine in Mid-Nineteenth-Century France." *Art Journal* 45, no. 1 (March 1985): 27., 31

women, the equivalent of Manet's piece, but people did not find it scandalous because that time period had fallen into history. It seemed natural that women would be nude with men in that time. Manet's is merely a modern version. However, he did not paint it in the academic style that Titian used. He replaced Titian's style with his own, in a sort of challenge to the artists of the sixteenth century; Manet challenged the way people looked at things, from classic paintings to the nude.

Manet was always pushing the envelope, which is why he is known as the "Father of Modernism." He inspired Monet and others who came after him. In *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, it is clear how Manet influenced the impressionists. He uses very hurried and short brushstrokes to make up the foiled still life and background that the impressionists quickly adopt. The critics complained that he had submitted a sketch as a final piece, a problem that many other impressionists had to face. The underdeveloped still life in the foreground was on purpose, and not just laziness as some critics had accused him of. He left it underworked as a play on the fact that still lifes are so highly valued in the artistic world as a demonstration of an artist's skill.

Manet had many critics that hated his work. Ernest Chesneau wrote, "Manet will have talent the day he gives up choosing subjects solely for their ability to create a scandal... his taste has been corrupted by his fascination with the bizarre."⁵ However, some critics did see the value of his work, and took note that he had brought on the beginning of a new style. Theophile Thore said that *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* was, "in slightly risqué taste... in these spurned works there appears to be a new beginning for French art. He is baroque and wild, sometimes apt and even profound."⁶ Another critic said, "What must be seen in this painting is not that it is a picnic, but that it is an entire landscape, with its strengths and its background so light and delicate; it is firm flesh

⁵ Francoise Cachin, *Manet: The Influence of the Modern*. (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1995.), 49-50

⁶ Cachin. *Manet: The Influence of the Modern.*, 50

modeled with great patches of light... , this corner of nature rendered with such fitting simplicity.”⁷

The Salon of 1863, known as The Salon of the Venuses witnessed many artists submitting nudes to the Salon. Cabanal’s *Le Naissance de Venus (The Birth of Venus)* (Figure 4), painted in 1863, was the Salon’s most successful piece of the year, bought by Napoleon III for his personal collection. Because *Le Naissance* followed the guidelines for a nude of the period, it was very positively accepted by the public and critics. This nude is a goddess, made clear because she is being birthed from the ocean with cupids flying around her. It is the story of Venus being born from Uranus’ genitalia in the sea. She was highly acclaimed because she carefully walks the line of being sexual and modest. She has her body arched so that her curves are on display. Her arms are raised above her head, drawing the viewer in. She is specifically designed to be a sexual object, and yet she is still modest: she tries to cover her face, to show that she is shy; her leg is slightly twisted as if to hide what is not there; and her eyes are directed right at the viewer, as if she just woke from a nap or is trying to bring them closer.

Eugene-Emmanuel Amaury-Duva’s *Le Naissance de Venus (The Birth of Venus)* (Figure 5) was also in the Salon of the Venuses, and was critically acclaimed, as well. His is of the same scene as Cabanal’s *Venus* with slight variations. His Venus is standing on the beach with the ocean breaking on the sand directly behind her. She does not have cupids surrounding her, yet she is still obviously a goddess because of her setting. She too walks the fine line of being sexual and modest: she has one arm raised, like Cabanal’s Venus, and is playing with her strawberry blonde hair; her body is in a *contrapposto* stance with her hips shifting to one side, and like all nudes of the time, she does not have genitalia, yet is represented in the seashells that lie on the ground next to her.

⁷ Cachin. *Manet: The Influence of the Modern.*, 53

She is sexual yet de-sexed.

Baudry's *Le Perle et la Vague* (Figure 6) was not in the Salon, but is a great example of a nude being just over the line. It is the same story as the others: Venus emerging from the ocean. However, this Venus was too sexual for the critics to believe that she was a newborn goddess. She has her body turned away from the viewer, with her head turned to face them. Her eyes and slight smile suggest that she is teasing the viewer, and wants them to go to her. Her torso is turned just enough that her breast is visible. Her arms are close to her face, a sign that she is luring in the viewer. She lays on a bed of rocks next to the ocean, an uncomfortably looking place to lie. Next to her are bold sea shells, like Amaury-Duva's Venus. All of these signs, with little modesty, add up to a woman that looks more like a courtesan than a goddess. Castagnary did not believe that she should be a goddess,

And how much better this beautiful lady, she with the looks of a Parisian *modiste*, would look upon a sofa! After living so well in her luxury apartment... she can't feel quite comfortable on this rock near all those painful pebbles and sharp-pointed shells.

But a thought occurs: what is it she's doing here all alone, rolling her enamel eyes and flexing her dainty hands? Is she lying in wait for a millionaire, on his travels to faraway places? Perhaps it isn't the Venus of the boudoir after all, but the Venus of the seaside resort?⁸

Castagnary was describing what most viewers felt when they saw this painting. Baudry's Venus is too sexually positioned to have been successful. In looking at her, Castagnary could see that she was not born out of the ocean, and did not belong on the beach. Her arched spine and alluring face are not modest in their lustful calls. It was obvious to him, and other viewers, that she was merely playing the part of Venus.

⁸ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 121

While Cabanal and Amaury-Duva had pieces in the Salon in 1863, Manet had *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* hanging in the Salon des Refuses, which displayed the art works that were rejected from the Salon. In reaction to the Salon of the Venuses, Manet created a nude of his own. He had painted a nude woman in *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, but now he had wanted to do something that would rival and challenge the long standing stereotype of the nude. Manet painted *Olympia* (Figure 7), in 1863, as a reaction to the mass amounts of socially accepted nude paintings. *Olympia* did not look like any of the other nudes that had been shown in the Salon yet. Manet had created a new type of art that challenged the way people previously thought about nude paintings.

Victorine Meurent posed as *Olympia* as she did for some of Manet's earlier works. In this close to life-size painting, she is sitting propped up on a bed with one arm resting on a pillow, holding up her white blanket and the other resting on her side while covering her crotch with her hand. She looks directly at the viewer, with a serious expression. She is wearing a bracelet and a skinny, black ribbon that is tied around her neck. She is wearing nuleheal slippers that would be used as slippers to walk around the house in. There is a black woman behind her who is giving her flowers, presumably from a suitor. At the end of the bed is an erect black cat.

Olympia was inspired by Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (Figure 8) (1538), is a courtesan who is painted as a newlywed wife. Her servants are putting away wedding gifts in the background, and the dog at the end of the bed represents fidelity. The model, whose face Titian did not change, was a well known courtesan of the time. She is in the same general pose as *Olympia*. Though *Olympia* was based off of *Venus of Urbino*, they evoke very different feelings in those who view them. The *Venus of Urbino* is much more feminine and inviting than *Olympia*. She has her head bent to the side, shyly eyeing the viewer. She is masterbating, showing that she is getting ready for her

wedding night. Her body is elongated and her strawberry blonde hair rests on her shoulders. She has a much sterner air about her. Smith and Jenkins relate: "In contrast with its predecessors, *Olympia* is explicit and intrusive, aggressively sexual, where its contemporaries often portrayed nudity sweetly and coyly."⁹ She is staring directly at the viewer in a bold and unashamed look, which makes her more masculine. Her hand is blocking off where her genitalia would be, which left many critics at the time wondering what she was hiding. She is uncaring to the fact that she sits naked. She is neither teasing nor beckoning anyone towards her.

Almost everyone who saw *Olympia* hated it immediately. They claimed that she was sickly, and looked as if she were dead. Victor de Jankovitz said, "The expression of her face is that of being prematurely aged and vicious; her body, of a putrefying colour, recalls the horror of the morgue." Many critics did not even realize what Manet had been portraying through *Olympia*. Jules Claretie said, "Who is this odalisque with a yellow stomach... a base model picked up I know not where, who represents Olympia? Olympia, what Olympia? A Courtesan, no doubt."¹⁰ The few that did realize that Manet had copied Titian's *Venus of Urbino* still did not like it. Amedee Cantaloube wrote that she was a, "sort of female gorilla, a grotesque in India rubber outlined in black, apes on a bed, in a state of complete nudity, the horizontal attitude of Titian's *Venus*: the right arm rests on the body in the same fashion, except for the hand, which is flexed in a sort of shameless contraction."¹¹

Olympia's gaze and hand were what made most people angry. Her gaze and hand are presented as though she is stopping you from going near her. She is giving an unreadable look that

⁹John A. Smith, and Chris Jenks, "Manet's Olympia." *Visual Studies* 21, no. 2: (2006) 157-166., **161**

¹⁰Flescher, "More on a Name, **29**

¹¹Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, **94**

is not happy. She is also placing her hand, flexed, over her genitalia. She is not a *venus pudica* because in covering herself, she is not drawing your eye to her sexuality; more so is she letting the viewer know that she does not welcome them. Manet did not make *Olympia* to titillate men, he painted the woman that he saw. In making her the correct proportions, she seemed short and stubby limbed compared to the amazonian venuses that had been elongated for the male eye. He always claimed, "I paint as simply as possible the things I see."¹² He did exactly what he said: he painted *Olympia* with body hair under her arms and on her stomach; her hair was pulled back, in yet another masculine fashion. Most nude paintings have their hair flowing down their sides. In his painting, Manet was not trying to hide the fact that *Olympia* was a prostitute. "Olympia" is a name that low class prostitutes would give themselves at that time.¹³

It angered the onlooking bourgeoisie that this low-class prostitute would look on them with such contempt and rejection. It angered them even more to think that Manet was poking holes in their nice illusion of what women in art should look like. He was merely showing them what they had all been looking at this whole time. He did not disguise his model in longer limbs, flowing hair, an ocean backdrop, or with a historical background story. He painted what they all had been seeing without realizing it, a naked prostitute.

Manet saw things the world in a different light than any other person had seen it before. It was because of this that he was rightfully called the "Father of Modernism." He thought outside of the box, allowing himself to create a new style and way of seeing art. He did not accept ideas just because others said them, which led to him learning to challenge all preconceived notions about class and life of the modern Paris. The earlier nudes in paintings were all the same. They all were

¹² Flescher, "More on a Name, 31

¹³ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 86

elongated, in a seductive pose, yet shy and sexless. Manet saw the nude paintings for what they really were behind their goddess facades. He took the classic nude and showed her as the real person behind the painting; which was a woman being paid to be naked.

Illustrations

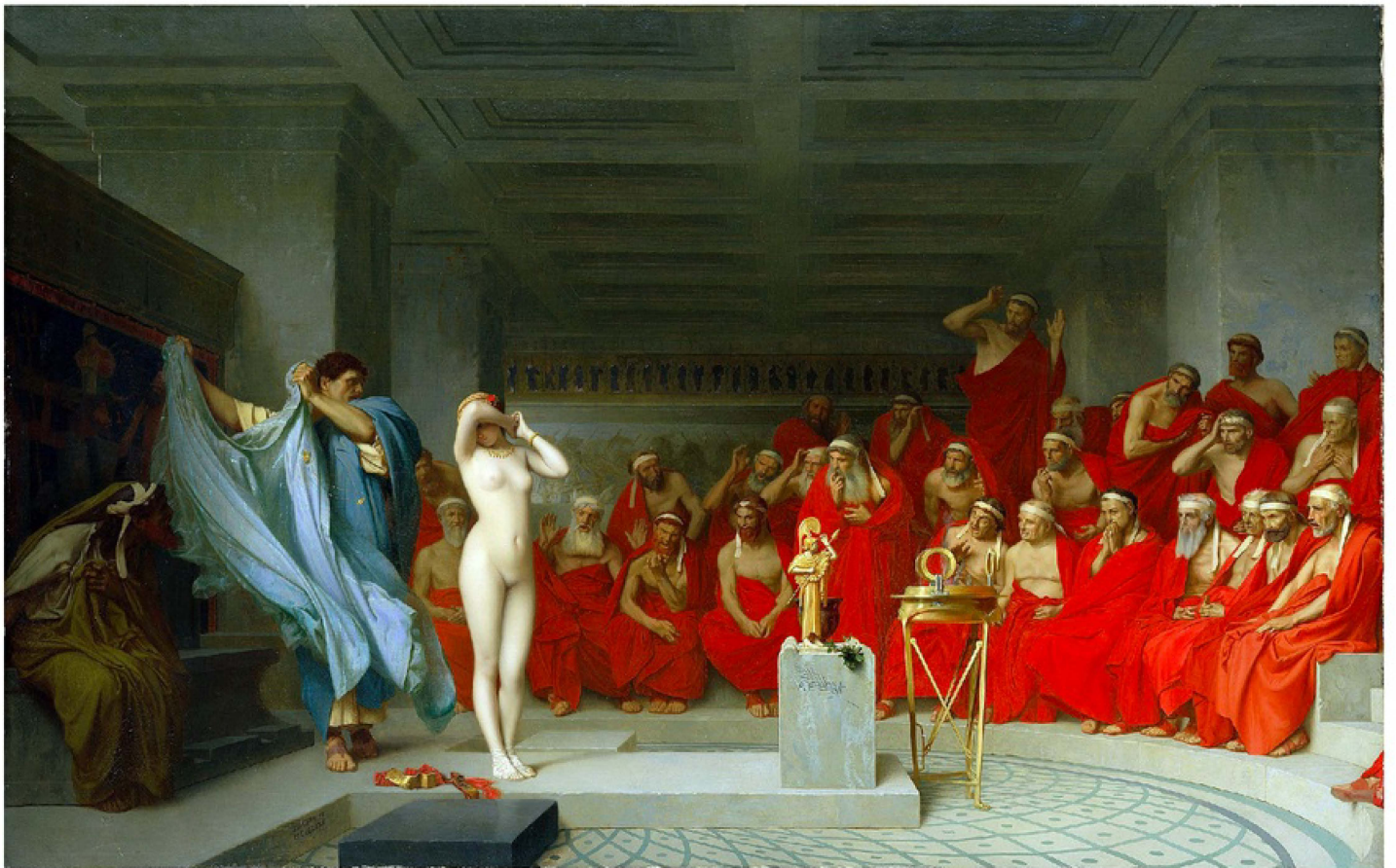


Figure 1 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Phryne devant l'Areopage*, 1861



Figure 2 Edouard Manet, *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, 1863



Figure 3 Titian, *Concert Champetre*, 1508



Figure 4 Alexandre Cabanal, *Le Naissance de Venus*, 1863



Figure 5 Eugène-Emmanuel Amaury-Duva, *Le Naissance de Venus*, 1862

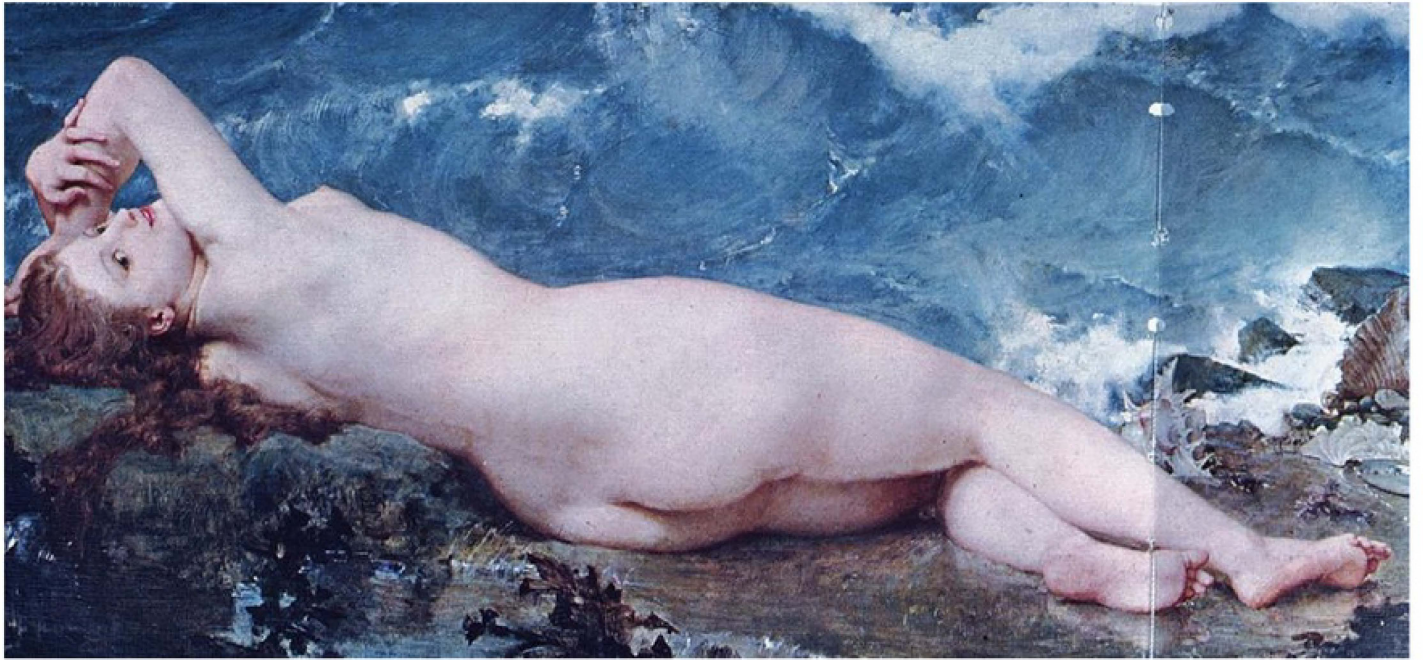


Figure 6 Paul Baudry, *Le Perle et la Vague*, 1863



Figure 7 Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863



Figure 8 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538