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# Mature Manet

*by Paul du Quenoy*

For the most part, the career and legacy of Édouard Manet was dominated by his association with the Impressionists. His earlier paintings—the limpidly seductive *Olympia* and the risqué *Luncheon on the Grass* (both 1863)—were watershed works that encouraged his younger *confrères* to defy the stale conventions of realism and move toward rawer depictions of light, color, and sensation. Manet came to be identified as the movement's leader, but the role never quite suited him. Thoroughly bourgeois in background, affect, and lifestyle (he was the scion of prominent legal and diplomatic families), he sat outside the bohemian ranks and sensibilities of contemporary artists, many of whom were so radical that their exclusion from the Salon's exhibitions became a point of pride. Henri Fantin-Latour's 1867 portrait of Manet, which introduces the Art Institute of Chicago's retrospective "Manet and Modern Beauty," makes him look more like a cautious and even weary banker than an iconoclastic painter. Indeed, Manet had no qualms about importuning the Salon to feature his own works, even as the Impressionists he was thought to have led organized their own counter-exhibitions.

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habits.

It is in this spirit that the Art Institute, in its first exhibition of the artist in more than half a century, has chosen to focus on Manet's later years, from about 1876 to his death in 1883. Hobbled by his affliction with tertiary syphilis—complications of which limited his mobility and eventually killed him at the not-so-tender but far-from-advanced age of fifty-one—Manet saw his social ambit and artistic ambitions diminish in these years. So did the size and scale of his works. Because of his declining health, many of his later paintings were either begun in natural settings and completed in the comfort of his studio, or simply contrived in the studio altogether, with nature and its affects suggested by what were, in effect, props based on drawings or imagination. Contemporaries derided this trajectory as an artistic retreat into works that were too "pretty" and perhaps even too personal, dominated as they were by lovely ladies in floral settings. Perhaps inadvertently, however, this later corpus of work harmonized nicely with the emerging dictum of "art for its own sake" and the cult of beauty espoused across the Channel by Walter Pater, John Ruskin, and their younger generation of followers. In any case, the exhibition culminates in the deeply affecting portraits of the actress and model Jeanne Demarsy and Manet's friend Méry Laurent (both 1881 or 1882) as the muses of Spring and Autumn, which are components of an incomplete cycle of works intended to depict the four seasons through the prism of feminine beauty in which Manet so unapologetically indulged. In this he rose fully to Baudelaire's prophetic injunction that the "painter of modern life" should embrace nothing less than "beauty, fashion, and happiness."

A close look at the works on display suggests an appealingly deeper dimension, though at times the exhibition's commentary interjects suppositions of social relevance that may not, in fact, be there. *In the Conservatory* (1877–79), for example, depicts a mature couple—modeled on married friends of Manet who worked together running a Parisian fashion business—whose body language and deflected expressions make them seem a bit at odds. The exhibition's insistence that this resulted from a supposed desire to "focus attention on modern social and gender relations" falls rather flat in the absence of any indication from Manet that these issues were sources of his inspiration or objects of his intent. The scene looks more like a natural moment of ennui wrapped up in the comforting surroundings of cultivated nature. Assertions of searing gender commentary are also belied by Manet's charming domestic portraits of his wife Suzanne, which were never intended for public display and only left the family collection when she sold them in her financially straitened widowhood. These images of a woman who at no point in nearly twenty years of marriage set foot in her husband's studio reveal a scarcely perturbed serenity, captured in rosy lips, that would never have dreamed of asking questions about her painterly spouse's more prurient habits.

*Édouart Manet*, Café-Concert, *1878-79, Oil on canvas.*

The best works in the exhibition arise from the rapidly transforming urban life of Paris in the late 1870s. Presented with stunning critical and commercial success at an exhibition organized by the prominent cultural magazine *La Vie Moderne* in April 1880, they capture the foundations of the *Belle Époque*—that halcyon age between France's ignominious defeat in its war with Prussia from 1870–71 and the doom and self-alienation of the First World War. Even those works which, from medical necessity, had to be contrived in the artist's studio capture a dynamism of that which fell before his eyes and sketchpad during what was by all accounts an exciting time to be alive. Manet's facility in sketching is admirably captured by a rarely seen display of letters to friends and intimates, which he illustrated with various "micro-visuals." But it is in the paintings that we truly see life as he wanted to depict it, combining an impressionistic affect with realistic portrayal. The

daring *Café-Concert* (1878–79) rivals the work of Degas in its layering of various strata of Parisian life. In the center a mature bourgeois—who looks not unlike Manet himself—sits beside a bored female companion who has lost his attention to a *chanteuse*, whom we see only in the reflection of the establishment's heavy mirror. Between performer and spectator a barmaid takes a swig of beer with one hand, vulgarly resting the other on her hip. The painting's evocative power rests not in what the artist would like the viewer to imagine of these characters, but in what the viewer would simply see in all its actuality. *Still Life with Oysters and Champagne* (1876–78) invitingly frames its delicacies in shimmering relief, accentuated by the lower half of a Japanese fan. Despite the shock with which some contemporaries reacted to the models featured in *Plum Brandy* (*ca*. 1877) and *Nude Arranging Her Hair* (1878–79), the figures are totally unaffected in their confrontation with the demands and stresses of modern life. Not exactly beautiful, they better reflect the real than the ideal. The ambiguity continues in Manet's *Portrait of Émilie Ambre as Carmen* (1880), in which it remains unclear whether the depiction is of the singer (herself a minor celebrity) or the character whom she portrays.

The works dating from Manet's very last years—he painted until nearly the end of his life—absolved him of all controversy at posthumous exhibitions in 1884 and in 1889, the latter at the same World Expo that gave France and the world the Eiffel Tour. That monument, initially reviled by many, was not intended to be permanent. In the present day, the exhibition at hand reminds us that Manet, whose critics could be equally disparaging, painted with an honesty that would assure his timelessness all the same.

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