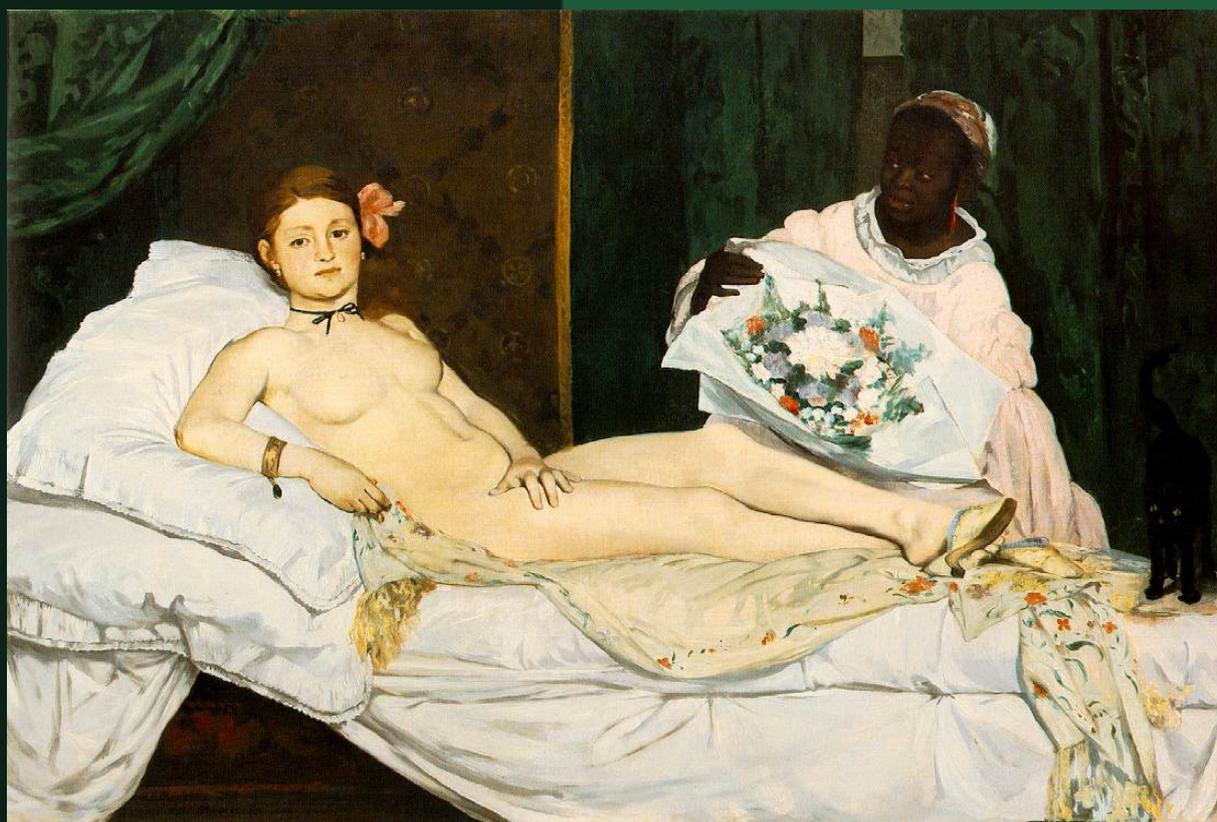


Edouard Manet

Olympia

Appreciation



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General

The academic routine of the visual arts in Europe, was bound to be interrupted by Edouard Manet, during the first years of the second half of 19th century. Manet was born in 1832, in France. His action is connected to the start up of the third revolutionary wave in visual arts, by following Courbet's steps. (Second revolutionary wave).¹ His first attempt to flutter the doves was his presentation in the 'Salon of the Rejected' (Salon des refusés)² of his work *'The Luncheon on the Grass'* (1863). *Olympia* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay) was exposed in the same salon two years later, in 1865. This move shocked the public and provoked the synchronous critics. *Olympia* was a 'flat', toneless painting of a nude woman, which literally received negative feedback and raised angry reactions. We can say that this painting leads Manet towards Impressionism.

Analysis

The painting shows a nude woman lying on a white bed. *Olympia* is staring at the viewer's direction. Her nudity isn't complete, as her hair is adorned with a reddish flower (probably an orchid) and she wears a black ribbon around her neck. Besides, she wears a bracelet and mule slippers. Next to her, a black skinned maid, dressed in pale pink, holds a bunch of flowers and looks as she is talking to her mistress. A cat silhouette can be barely seen, sitting on the bed's edge, hidden in the background. In the background dark green curtains alternate with the brown wallpaper. The only light forms that come forward, are the woman's pale nude body, the bed and the maid's clothes. The contrast of pale light and opaque dark forms juxtaposed in the composition, sets up an asymmetry and a total absence of perspective. The stillness of the figures and the 'vanishing' maid's head – because of its darkness combined with the background dark tones and the contrast to her light pink clothe – lead to hard transitions between light and shade, element that follows the Spanish painting tradition (Goya). Flatness, tonal intensity and form

¹ E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Phaidon Press, 1995, p. 512, 513

² In 1863 the formal *Salon* rejects from the 5000 works of art the 3000. Napoleon the 3rd agrees to organize the *Salon of the Rejected*, where among others, Manet, Sézanne, Pissaro and Xydias exhibit their works.

disintegration, are elements which all together, breathe some kind of irony, typical of modern art³. The painting is a composition of toneless colour ‘fields’⁴

Olympia’s body is toneless, as said, almost flat. The colour is pale and yellowish – odd to be used to express a woman’s skin. This colour was considered by the critics to be sign of dirt and poverty. The newspapers stated ‘*odalisque with yellow tummy, absolute ugliness, dead body in the morgue*’.⁵ They blamed, also, the artist for ‘childish ignorance of drawing’. In fact, Manet, by using flat ‘colour patches’, wanted to give his painting the impression of absolute reality. This technique initiates the birth of a new art ‘order’ of visual autonomy⁶ of space, light and shade and sentimental detachment.

Olympia follows the fore type of Aphrodites of Renaissance and especially Titian’s *Aphrodite of Urbino* (Galleria Uffici – Florence) and Giorgione’s *Asleep Aphrodite* (Gallery of Dresden).⁷ The painting is led by Manet to the two dimension space, to the equation of form and tool (stroke). The art critic Clement Greenberg,⁸ considered these elements as the principle characteristics of modern art. Attendant to the sentimental detachment is the anaesthetization of the item which, therefore, becomes an excuse for the painting action to come. *Olympia*’s body is nothing more than a colour spot in the composition of Manet’s work. The human loses his human hypostasis and turns to a visual message.⁹ Painting doesn’t mean anymore to describe and imitate, but rather express its own form. The school of ‘Art for art’ sets in with Manet.

The reasons that *Olympia* raised so sharp reactions are various. What was wrong with this painting, another nude painting among so many others? Firstly, the painting dissatisfied the people and critics as they didn’t accept its visual value, they disapproved it as a work of art. That is since Manet’s painting didn’t fulfill the common standards people were used to. The woman nude showed in a painting, must have been more fattish and pinkish so as to breathe health and wealth. *Olympia* is skinny and yellowish. Moreover, the toneless, almost flat body and the light outline of the figure, convinced the critics that the painter had ignorance of drawing. Secondly, the form’s elements mentioned, led the

³ Irene Florou, *Modern Art – A First Approach*, Athens School of Fine Arts, 2001, p. 12

⁴ Not to be confused with *Colour Field* of Abstract Expressionism (Rothko)

⁵ Nikos Daskalothanasis, *The Artist as Historical Individual from 19th to 20th Century*, Agra, Athens, 2004, p. 73

⁶ See ‘Art for art’ to be analyzed further down

⁷ Umberto Eco, *Storia Della Bellezza*, Kastaniotis, Athens, 2004, p. 16,17

⁸ Clement Greenberg (1909 - 1994) Influential American art critic closely associated with the abstract art movement in the United States.

⁹ Irene Florou, *Modern Art – A First Approach*, Athens School of Fine Arts, 2001, p. 13

people think that *Olympia* was a dirty and miserable prostitute. So, *Olympia* turns to be, now, a low class symbol, which menaces the existing status quo, as it brings out all the social parameters of the bourgeois routine, (money, prostitution, oppression, exploitation, inequality, poverty, immorality) which of course the state preferred to keep into obscurity. Still, Manet doesn't seem to understand or accept the 'dissident' role.¹⁰ Third, *Olympia* does not belong to a mythological sphere like the Renaissance's Aphrodites. She is a synchronous nude woman next to a dressed maid. T. J. Clark¹¹ detects the difference between the two, to the enactment of a nude body, in the one hand and the nudity as such, in the other. Therefore, the painting suggests an atrocious eroticism, inappropriate for the social establishment. *Olympia's* stare, enhances the feeling of provocative sexuality. The result was too real and audacious to be accepted. Hobesbawm states that the bourgeois' morality of abstinence, of this period, was running against reality in a violent way¹².

Conclusion

Manet, proved that he was an observer of a world in constant flux.¹³ Through *Olympia*, idealism is defeated by realism and eternity by impermanence,¹⁴ and the artist gives birth to the visual equivalent of *Modernité*,¹⁵ noun inspired by Charles Baudelaire¹⁶ and slogan of this era. However, as a result to this overthrow, comes the isolation. '*I truly wish you were here . . . for insults rain down on me like hail, and I have never before found myself in a situation like this*', Manet writes to Baudelaire on the 4th of May, 1865.

¹⁰ Nikos Daskalothanasis, *The Artist as Historical Individual from 19th to 20th Century*, Agra, Athens, 2004, p. 77

¹¹ T. J. Clark, English art historian (1943)

¹² Nikos Daskalothanasis, *The Artist as Historical Individual from 19th to 20th Century*, Agra, Athens, 2004, p. 73

¹³ Ingo F. Walther, *Impressionism*, Taschen, 2006, p. 40

¹⁴ Irene Florou, *Modern Art – A First Approach*, Athens School of Fine Arts, 2001, p. 11

¹⁵ Request of *Modernité* was the depiction of synchronous reality

¹⁶ Baudelaire has been close friend to Monet

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