

Seeing Manet with Patrizia

The following informal remarks spring from the line of thinking opened up by Patrizia Lombardo's study of art's affective dimensionⁱ and from memories of our friendship, the quick, mutuality of our exchanges whenever we spoke about literature or wandered together through the Princeton Art Gallery.

I paused, recently, in front of "Gypsy with Cigarette", a portrait by Manet, known for his "emotional distance" or lack of affect, and was not surprised to learn that this supposedly unfinished, undated picture of an unknown model found in the corner of his studio had been given various titles after Manet's death ("Femme indienne" or "Femme mexicaine", for example).ⁱⁱ The artist's fascination with Spanish subjects during the 1860's is well known ("Le Guitarrero", 1860; "Mademoiselle V en costume d'espada", 1862; "Lola de Valence", 1862, or the travestied version of Goya's clothed "Maja", "Jeune femme couchée en costume espagnol", 1862); but the facture of this picture, with its conspicuously broken brush strokes, is more characteristic of the artist's later style, closer to his portrait of "Emilie Ambre" in the role of *Carmen*, 1873, but without any hint of allusion to Goya.ⁱⁱⁱ The treatment of the dark-skinned female figure is also strikingly different from that of the earlier works destined for the salon, with their readable iconography of shawls, guitars, seductive dance poses, and bull-fighting costumes familiar to the Second Empire French public. This "gypsy's" clothing is almost abstract, not anthropologically precise, more an idea of "gypsy-ness" or foreign-ness than a copy. Her calm, slightly bemused expression neither denies nor challenges the viewer's gaze. Her tanned face is healthy and self-assured, ruddy from the sun, rather than artfully made-up. Yet theseeming naturalism of her handsome, somewhat mannish head is brought to light, not from nature, but from below, by the radiance of the shifting gold and yellow transparencies of her gorgeously painted blouse. The freedom of the shimmering brush strokes creates a complex self-reflexive space as grounding for the more traditionally painted head with its dark, intelligent eyes.

The affective charge in this painting does not come from the model's expression or her de-theatricalized pose, but from the seemingly gratuitous detail of the cigarette, flicked on as if to affirm the independence of both artist and subject, their freedom from all "social and domestic formalities."^{iv} Manet paints his image of the "gypsy" as self-determining, a slightly dandyfied portrait of his own artistic practice, no longer beholden to the Spanish masters he revered. Aside from the cigarette, the image does not conjure Romantic stereotypes of a Carmen-like woman. She sits on a non-descript studio couch, bored, thoughts elsewhere, holding an easy pose, her head leaning on one roughly outlined arm, the other arm hidden under her blouse, except for a brown patch of hand, with a just visible gold ring, on her hip. Sketchily painted studio props of a horse head and an open blue sky backdrop, are there to evoke the figure's connection with the natural world, and as concessions to popular taste. The un-modeled, murky reddish browns making up the lower part of the model's dress^v are cut off from the masterfully painted upper body by a jet-black belt^{vi} out of which emerge the beautifully rendered blouse and the head, which is brought into being by the light-changing colors of her self-adornment. The transgressive cigarette, the flick of the brush coming from outside the frame that caused our initial, connection to the picture, is a deft reminder of the artist's inventiveness. As Zola wrote

in “L’Artiste”, Manet marched according to his own lights... [he] made an effort to forget everything he had learned in museums.”^{vii} The “life” of the picture begins with the cigarette, but it is also the trigger that makes us look more closely, leading us in to see the lavishly painted drapements composed out of earth and light as tribute to the resolutely un-seductive, fully independent figure with her wide-open eyes, furry collar, and beaded earrings dangling from her black, unkempt hair. If “un-finishedness” and “instability” are key values of modern art, Manet seems to suggest that there is nothing provisional or sketchy about this figure; her head acquires a kind of solidity, even monumentality^{viii}, that is not changing or ephemeral, as in the landscapes of Monet, for example. The subject of the picture is not a mere reflection of the artist’s own “impressions”, but a new life with its own integrity. It may be, then, that the sketchiness, murkiness, and even vagueness of certain parts of this picture are there to remind us of the path toward an alchemical transfer of identities between artist and model, gold and paint, that constitutes Manet’s story of art. Unlike the Realism despised by Baudelaire, his subjects “create their own ambience”, are not created by it.^{ix}

With an invisible Patrizia at my side, I began to think about that dash of white as the “affective turn”, where “facture et image”, emotions and intellect (irony, admiration, respect, pleasure, uncertainty...) meet, where “the social emotion of sympathy...takes us out of the prison of the self.”^x

ⁱ “Stendhal and Hazlitt’s Theories of Emotion”, in *Exploring Text and Emotions*, edited by Lars Saetre, Patrizia Lombardo, and Julien Zanetta. Aarhus: Acta Jutlandica. Humanities Series, 2014/13.

ⁱⁱ Purchased by Edgar Degas and listed in inventories as “Femme indienne” or “Femme mexicaine” and as “La Bohémienne” in the sale of 1884.

ⁱⁱⁱ Similar, loose brush strokes can be seen in the rendering of the pinkish cape of “Mlle Victorine en costume d’espada”, 1862. Clement Greenberg has stressed the “inconsistency”, as opposed to the evolution toward impressionism, of Manet’s painterly style in “Manet as an Artist Exceptional in his Inconsistency”, *Art Forum*, 1967; but Degas, “avec sa connaissance profonde du peintre” saw this picture as typical of his friend’s late work. Eric Darragon, *Manet*. Editions Citadelles, 1991, p. 107.

^{iv} T.J. Clark begins his study by paraphrasing Meyer Shapiro’s important insight in “The Nature of Abstract Art”, *Marxist Quarterly*, 1937: “Early Impressionism...depended for its force on something more than painterly hedonism or a simple appetite for sunshine and colour. The art of Manet and his followers had a distinct ‘moral aspect’ visible above all in the way it dovetailed an account of visual truth with one of social freedom.” *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*. Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1984, p. 3.

^v Manet referred disparagingly to the “stews and gravies” of orthodox painting of his time. Greenberg.

^{vi} Manet admired Velasquez’s striking use of black, which he would use conspicuously in many paintings, most notably in the “Dead Toreador” (“L’Homme mort”), 1864.

^{vii} Emile Zola, “Edouard Manet”, *L’Artiste*, Jan. 1, 1867.

^{viii} An apt word suggested by my colleague, Lionel Gossman.

^{ix} Carl E. Schorske. *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. Vintage Books, 1981, p. 341

^x Lombardo, p. 60.

