

## Creative Arts

At the time it was first made public, Eduard Manet's painting *Olympia* was greeted with a widespread public scandal. The art world of 1865 France could not appreciate the aesthetic leap that Manet had taken in his early start on Modernism for the simple reason that they were shocked by the painting's content. Faced with this painting today, many art aficionados concentrate on the representations indicated within the content as well as the intuitive leap into modernism represented in Manet's style. This vast difference in reaction over time is not necessarily simply a process of desensitization – the painting has now been a part of the public sphere for more than 100 years – or of the 20/20 hindsight of the emerging modernist styles. It is instead largely due to the changing nature of social ideals, expectations and beliefs of the community. This changing viewpoint is thus not limited to the passing of time, but expands to include any difference in focus. While the painter will see one aspect of the painting, such as the unique style, the designer might focus upon the use of colors and the feminist might understand a specific stance on the issues of femininity. Even within the single categorization of the feminist, however, dissension can be found as one chooses to see the painting as representing the strength and dignity of the prostitute, another sees it as being emblematic of the practice of making woman a commodity and still another interprets *Olympia* as being a victim in her own world. Through this discussion, the reaction of Manet's contemporaries will be analyzed for content and context as well as the triple modern viewpoints of the strong Olympia, the victimized Olympia and the product Olympia, demonstrating Manet's intention to challenge gender stereotypes for men as well as for women.

The painting in question portrays a nude woman lying in a relatively relaxed pose with her ankles casually crossed and her arms resting calmly, one crossed over her with her hand resting negligently upon her vagina and the other propping her up gently from her pillow. While this hand is gently handling the edge of the ornate blanket upon which she sits, this too seems casual, as if it is merely something for her to do. She wears nothing but a gentle pair of heeled sandals, a ribbon tied around her neck, a golden bracelet and a flower in her hair. She is served by a black woman so dark that she is nearly lost in the background color just as is lost the black cat that is actually positioned in the foreground. The tones of the painting are generally dark with Olympia's body and bed standing out in starkly whitened contrast and a splash of red color in the flower in her hair. What is generally not argued regarding the interpretation of this painting is that the woman is a prostitute, evidenced by her jewelry, her heels and her nudity, and she is a fairly successful one in that as she has a servant and lies on a satin brocade blanket complete with oriental tassels carelessly thrown over the sumptuous cushions of a curtained bed. Beyond this, the representation of the female evident in this painting seems to be completely subject to the interpretation.

The critics of Manet's time reacted to the painting with absolute horror, interpreting in it signs of the dead and decaying woman. "The expression of [Olympia's] face is that of a being prematurely aged and vicious; the body's putrefying color recalls the horror of the morgue" (Bernheimer 102). She is described in more specific terms by Edmund and Jules de Goncourt:

A white flesh, arms, shoulders that show down to the small of the back;  
shoulderstraps that barely hold and partially hide the armpit; big beautiful eyes,

a little round; a pear-shaped nose; the mouth without inflection, forming a straight line the color of rouge in the face, completely white from rice powder. Wrinkles in all this which the light, playing on this white, make seem black; and on each side of the mouth a deep furrow in the shape of a horseshoe that comes together under the chin, which it severs with a big wrinkle of old age. A figure that, underneath the appearance of a courtesan still young enough for her profession, is one hundred years old and takes on at times the undefinable terror of a painted corpse. (Goncourt 348)

This gruesomely negative impression of Olympia is not necessary because she is so ugly – indeed, she was reported to be among the most beautiful courtesans in the city (Bernheimer 255) – but because she is a shocking subject in a town that was attempting to pretend it didn't have such activities occurring within its confines. "The public nakedness of a beautiful woman sometimes becomes a question of politics ... which actions are permitted under which unspoken and frequently changing rules" (Friedrich 1). The open presentation of a prostitute suggested a powerful figure, a woman in control of her own destiny, a bold statement about the contemporary society that would condone, albeit circumspectly, the capitalization such an image represented. The only way these ideas could be contained was by attacking them, interpreting them in terms of their various parts, dissecting the strength of the woman into a caricature of her impending destruction and the understanding of her as a symbol of decay.

Modern day interpretations of the painting are as different as the present-day assumption of 1800s reactions to nudity versus the reality of their shock concerning subject matter. Olympia can still be seen in terms of her power as it is recognized that

she is positioned in repetition of previous well-known renditions of the goddess Venus like that done by Titian.

Manet was reworking one of the most familiar as well as one of the most conventionally idealized themes of European painting ... Olympia proclaimed for those who knew anything at all of the past that her ancestresses were the Venetian Venuses of the High Renaissance, in particular Titian's Venus of Urbino. (Hamilton 67)

In addition, focusing strictly upon what is presented in the painting, Olympia can be seen to be comfortably relaxed in her nudity, boldly staring out of the frame directly at her viewers, daring them to look away and daring them to look. Her expression is not welcoming, despairing, sorrowing or inviting. She is not pretending to be anything she isn't, yet she also makes no apologies for what she is. Her hand, resting on her thigh and obscuring vision of her genital region makes the claim that even here, in her nudity, that aspect of her is hers alone to give or refuse. She is not under control of any man. Her rich robes, fresh flowers, sumptuous bed and dutifully attentive servant girl all suggest that she is perfectly capable of taking care of her and has little or no need for a man, despite the nature of her work. This all seems to indicate Olympia was painted as a means of encouraging the female audience to find strength within them, redefining gender stereotypes by placing the woman in control of her own body.

Focusing on those aspects of her that were noted by previous critics, however, there are undeniably many aspects of the painting that can be interpreted as Olympia's victimization. She is passively lying on the bed, as if without male direction she has no proper activity in which to take part. She is fair and delicate with the comparison to rice

paper made by individuals like the Goncourts and she can be seen to be aging with the presence of wrinkles marring her otherwise pretty face. The lines around the mouth particularly emphasize the thought that she might be frightened for her future or that she might be uncontrollably, desperately on display. Her profession, too, suggests a degree of victimization in that she must turn to prostitution as one of the only means by which she can continue to survive – a thought that contributes to the perceived fear etched in the stiffness of her back or the carefully unemotional lines of her face.

Finally, Olympia has been perceived, both then and now, as a means of marketing the prostitute, recognizing the taboo topic of making the woman a commodity. This is expressed in the presentation of her facing the front of the canvas fully, as if on display, yet with a direct stare as if she is aware of what is happening. She is the puppy in the window with the knowledge that it is herself up for bid. In much the same way the servant girl offers her flowers to Olympia, Olympia is offered to the viewer. In purchasing the painting, the individual was ostensibly purchasing the woman, reducing her further into the object of commodity rather than individual. An image of beauty is therefore transformed instead into an image and symbol of capitalism. In this sense, Manet can be said to be painting for the male audience and reinforcing the gender stereotypes.

Attempting to determine which of these interpretations is the 'correct' one is a mute question. Each of these interpretations of Olympia is correct because each is presented from the perspective of the various individuals viewing her thanks primarily to the openness with which Manet portrayed her. She is a symbol of death and decay as an aging prostitute just as much as she is a victim of her times and situation. She is a

symbol of strength in the political power of exposing secrets and within her blatant reality just as she is strong in her bold acceptance of whom and what she is. However, she is also weak in that she has little option but to continue at her profession for as long as she possibly can, regardless of her own personal feelings regarding it or the deadening effect it might have on her ability to become emotionally involved with the rest of the human race. At the same time, she is also a symbol of the extreme capitalistic nature of the Western society in which even the individual woman can be reduced to little more than the latest popular commodity on the shelf.

## Works Cited

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