What makes painting modern?

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Modernities

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To many art historians, modernism began in the Renaissance period, with Modernist thinking, although, it only really began to take shape in the 18th Century. Modernist thinkers didn't just want to imitate ancient models. Eugene Delacroix (1798 -1863) and Jean -Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780 -1867) best demonstrate the difference between the progressive modernists and the politically conservative anc ients. Ingres was painting 'beautiful' paintings that were identified with the classical academic style, whereas Delacroix's style was labelled as 'ugly'. This was most probably due to the subject matter of contemporary life with some anarchistic and mater ialistic elements thrown in. From Delacroix, progression brought us to Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and Edouard Manet (1832 -83). These modern painters painted scenes from everyday life, the poor, and the prostitutes. In doing so they were continuously point ing out all the social problems in their contemporary society, which these artists believed should be dealt with. Some critics even perceived at the time that Manet was ahead of his day. Manet is considered to be the first modern painter; he really pushed his painterly techniques and subject matter to the limits. This was advice he got from Charles Baudelaire, a French poet and critic who started writing art criticism. He urged artists to take subjects from men and women in the streets and the streets itself.

Essentially Manet started Impressionism, as in his first paintings, he abandoned the traditional techniques of soft shading and went for more harsh contrasts. He also wanted the modern world to change. Manet lived and worked in the city of Paris and a t this time of Modernisation, many new things were occurring about the city. I think that this was a big factor in his work being so modern. It was a time of industrialisation and mechanisation, and the city is the place for change, opportunity and adventu re. The city was seen as the modern

experience. The city offers so much that is new, and so much culture. These were the ideas of Walter Benjamin.

The public's shock at some of Manet's pieces demonstrate just how original and modern his art work was. People don't like change, they are scared of it. In *Le Dejeuner sur L'Herbe* (1862), Manet depicts two clothed men and one naked woman having a picnic. You can see how he uses old ideas for a modern perspective in the composition of the three figures in the foreground. It is a modern interpretation of *Judgement of Paris* by Mark Antonio Raymonde. This was an engraving, and in the bottom right hand corner there is a very similar scene. This is evidence of Manet studying the old masters and how he incorporated it into his modern paintings using contemporary scenes and characters. There is also a semi-clad woman in the background. She seems to be too big, but she lures you into the landscape, demanding you to think about it differently. It's interaction for the first time, and viewers can no longer be aloof.

As what is considered to be Manet's first modern painting, it was seen as something that was strange and humorous. It was strange because when it first came out, no one knew what to make of it. They didn't know what the narrative was, and this was something they liked to know, and were used to. There didn't seem to be a story in this painting, nothing seemed to make sense at all. The public thought that this painting was humorous and they would go to the Salon de s Refuses to stare, mock and laugh at it. As to the juxtaposition of dressed men and naked women, this was not uncommon, it had been done before. Although this was a modern interpretation, as it was depicting a scene of everyday life, with contemporary characters. There were many Classical paintings that showed nudes in a landscape though this was very different. Manet's modern treatment of the nude

here turns to face the viewer squarely; nudes usually looked away or down. The idea of two clothed men and tw o un-clothed women came from 16th Century Titian, although there they are nymphs. With Manet you get reality. It was achieved by taking away the pretence that the woman in the foreground was a goddess or nymph, and just showing us who she really was – a model. And this was a breakthrough.

Manet also worked hard to achieve a raw effect with the bold blobs of colour, although the public didn't want to be able to se brushstrokes. With this painterly technique, Manet was letting the viewer see "the hand of th e artist"[1], and this was a break with tradition.

The nude here was named Victorine Meurent, and she was Manet's most favourite model. So much has been said about this painting and its model. What was so startling was the way in which Manet depicts his model to be staring out at the viewer with such frankness [2]. (Manet also does this again in *Olympia*). She seems to be inviting the viewer into the painting, maybe even challenging the viewer. This would have caused much tension when publicly displayed, because many of the upper class bourgeoisie men viewing the piece would have had encounters with prostitutes, and this painting was like a reminder, as if to say, 'Here I am!'. Manet has painted her in such a way that we are told that she is definitely a domestic ated woman, and not a nymph or a goddess, as a Classical nude isn't what you would call 'naked', whereas this is. Manet doesn't use all the usual codes for depicting the nude and doesn't abide by the rules of composition. He just paints "no matter what"[3]. At the Salon there were many nudes, nymphs and satyrs, but due to Manet's confidence in his character who

[1] The Private Life of a Masterpiece (Video)
[2] Clement Greenberg, Modernist Painting, Art in Theory 1900 - 2000
[3] Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *Cubism*, Art in Theory 1900 - 2000

stared out, nudes were never going to be the same again. His indifference to subject matter and his flat colour -modelling ensure his paintings to be come revolutionary, as this was something that hadn't been done before with such confidence.

Although, Manet did depict modern life in the way of old masterpieces, of which he studied at the Louvre. He was greatly inspired by the works of Diego Velazquez (1599-1660) and Francisco Goya (1746-1828). Historical painting was considered to be the highest form of art at the time and although he did do some history paintings, he also turned to everyday life to make modern -day history paintings. When it came to the way in which Manet painted, he could be described as being quintess entially modern. This is displayed in a frankness that had never been done before. Modernity is a desire to bring about the new, and this is exactly what Manet did in some of his most famous paintings including *Olympia* (1863) and *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergere* (1882). The emphasis Manet puts on the flat surface of the paintings is a modern trait. Also the reason many of his figures look so flat is because he was painting them in the full light of day, where rounded forms really do look like that. Manet was doing this on purpose, putting his models under scrutiny, like spotlight. He systematically broke with the conventions of the 19 th Century. He was trying to pay attention to form, demonstrating the flatness of the canvas rather than the object. His art seems to "represent the last attempt in Western painting to achieve a full equivalent to the greatest realistic painting of the past"[4]. This was the foundations of Modernism.

Manet's last large canvas was *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergere*. This piece caused an outrage as it was considered to have been "badly drawn...

[4] Michael Fried, *Three American Painters*, Art in Theory 1900 - 2000

the light was indecisive", "bluish, murky" ; "the glass and reflection were hopelessly bo tched."[5] Though there were some critics who praised the piece, such as Emile Bergerat, "Here is something seen, sincere, new, something which shakes us out of our habits!" This shows how it was seen as a break with tradition, a break with habit. And what makes the painting thought to be so modern, was that it seemed that the woman at the bar might be selling herself as a prostitute. This was common practice at the time so it was highly likely, and this would make her the typical figure to represent modern life at the time. She was essentially a symbol of mo dernity.

Olympia (1863) exhibited in the Salon of 1865 shows a nude in a pose that was reminiscent of paintings done by Titian, Velazquez and Goya. This nude is non-traditional and uncon ventional. As with the nude in *Le Dejeuner sur L'Herbe*, this nude sta res out at the viewer challengingly. The viewers couldn't read this painting as respectable due to the types of codes Manet used. He gives us a black cat in the painting, which is a traditional symbol of sexual activity. The sharp contrast between the woma n's pale body and the background, and black maid, makes the viewer acutely aware of the nude and her intimidating stare which would have caused the viewers of the Salon of 1865 increasing discomfort.

From looking closely at just a few of Manet's most famo us works, I have been able to see what makes painting modern. Manet demonstrates modernity in his work in many different ways, and the juxtaposition of which makes his paintings modern. The painterly techniques and the content of his work are essential. Th e way in which he makes his paintings flat and two dimensional , is evident in *Olympia*. In *Un Bar aux Folies – Bergere*, his typical imagery of contemporary life is

[5] T.J. Clarke , *The Painting of Modern Life*

evident. Depicting these types of scenes is seen as very modern because it hadn't been done b efore with such vigour. Modernity is all about the new, bringing about a change. This is what Manet was doing with his subject matter. And finally, another modern asp ect in Manet's art is shown in Le *Dejeuner sur L'Herbe*. When painting the nude he doesn't even try to use any codes to show she is a nymph or a goddess. His blatant disregard for her nudity was revolutionary and shocking at the same time in 19 th Century Paris. Manet broke with tradition here also by not making clear what the painting was narrating, and leaving his paintings look to the public as if they were unfinished, although this was all done intentionally.

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