Chapter

1

THE ART IN ART

'No work of art can be great, but as it deceives; to be otherwise is the prerogative of nature only.'

Edmund Burke, philosopher

BEHIND THE SCENES

Sight, it has been known for centuries, is a construction of the mind. We all see the large **S** nearby as floating above its shadow but that perception is incorrect: the two forms are on the same plane. Although we know there is no actual shadow our conscious knowledge of that cannot overrule the ingrained habit of the neurons which determine sight. Even our certainty that the Earth orbits the sun is daily contradicted by the sun's path across the sky.

Great masters have always known that vision is only a semblance of reality. Almost all of them have used the flaws in our optical process, like graphic artists also do, to convey multiple levels of meaning in one image. Thus while normal perception suffices for superficial enjoyment of art, as any museum visitor knows, it cannot interpret canonical art with any accuracy. The same images look quite different when viewed through the lens of a different theory which is why scholars have long tried to see art through the eyes of contemporaries. Yet what type of contemporary would have had the complex vision of a great master? Perhaps another artist of similar calibre but certainly not scholars, humanists, ecclesiastics, poets or other literary types. This book will demonstrate that subtle visual perception and in-depth knowledge of the canon is the key to great art – not emblems or iconology, literature or psychology, not even the patron's wishes. Knowledge of biography, sociology and politics, while useful, are all of little import to the unravelling of a great masterpiece. In great art, vision – and the canon – rule.

Fig. 1 Courbet, *The Stonebreakers* (destroyed during World War II)[*]

Just as I recently demonstrated in *The Art Newspaper* that Michelangelo's Jonah on the Sistine ceiling is posed like a painter[†] so Michael Fried has argued that some of the figures painted by Courbet were not just what they seemed but were surrogates for the artist in the act of painting. Fried's theory was difficult to substantiate through Courbet's art alone but a new review of Manet's art supports it. Fried noted that the workmen in Courbet's early masterpiece, *The Stonebreakers*, appear strangely close to the surface (fig. 1). This impression is enhanced by the shadows of the men which are not 'realistic' but appear as though projected on a nearby wall. Fried proposed that:

> 'the figures of the old stonebreaker and his young counterpart may be seen as representing the painter-beholder's right and left hands respectively: the first wielding a shafted implement that bears a distant analogy to a paintbrush or palette knife, the second supporting a roundish object that might be likened to the (admittedly much lighter) burden of a palette.'

He also observed that the posture of the workmen, *bent* under their grueling labor, puns on the artist's name (*courbé*).[1] If, however, the men are 'artists' at work with 'brush' and 'palette' then

[*] All illustrations in the book are works by Manet, except where noted.
[†] See "Michelangelo's Art Through Michelangelo's Eyes" (2005), later published in paid space in *The Art Newspaper*, June 2006, pp. 30-1.

the shallow-looking landscape is like a canvas, an interpretation that explains the shadows and the figures' proximity to the surface. The background is not just a landscape but an upright *painted* landscape onto which the workers' shadows are projected. They are *en plein air* and in a studio.

Fig. 2 Etienne Carjat, *Courbet painting in his studio* (c. 1866-7)

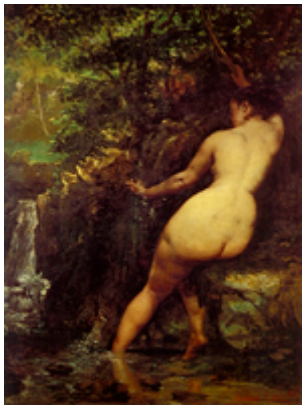

Fig. 3 Courbet, *The Source* (1868)

Fried also proposed that the nude in *The Source,* a later painting, was a substitute for Courbet again, her left arm in a position to hold a palette, the other 'painting' (fig. 3).[2] He suggested that the canvas was a reprise of the central section of his *Studio* with the seated nude replacing the artist before his landscape.[3] Scholars seem to have ignored his insight but he could have added further evidence to persuade skeptics: that the nude's pose has some similarity to Courbet's own at work in an earlier but contemporary photograph (fig. 2). The sloping torso, turned head and upper left arm of each figure are equivalent. The legs, though switched, are in the same position. The right one has become the left and vice versa. It is possible that Courbet even used this photograph to help pose his model because unlike Fried I do not believe that the arrangement of the nude in an artist's pose was unconscious. Courbet placed figures in artists' poses on several occasions and Manet, as we will see, used the same method throughout his career.

Fig. 4 Courbet, *The Wheat Sifters*

Fried described, among many other examples, how the posture of the central woman in *The Wheatsifters* is analogous to the artist seated in front of the canvas facing it and connected the grain falling onto the white cloth with paint on canvas (fig. 4). Likewise, he called the woman at left with the dish a surrogate for Courbet's left hand holding a palette.[4] In a forthcoming book Fried's interpretation will be shown to be entirely logical by other methods. Nevertheless, the following interpretation of Edouard Manet's art supports Fried's theory because it suggests that Manet would have *read* Courbet's paintings in like manner.

Fig. 5 *Mlle. V in the Costume of an Espada*

Fig. 6 Detail of fig. 5

Edouard Manet, who followed Courbet as the reigning rebel of French art, must have studied his predecessor's work closely because some of his early paintings are remarkably close in construction to Courbet's first masterpiece. *Mlle V...in the Costume of an Espada* is a scene that on the surface makes no apparent sense (fig. 5). Why is a woman, Manet's favorite model Victorine Meurend, in a bullring? Why does her pink cloth bear no resemblance to the color and rectangular shape of a matador's cape? Why is her figure so large when those not far away are so small? One scholar has called this 'inconsistency' Manet's 'cold indifference to any *logical* representation of space [italics added].'[5] Why, in Carol Armstrong's recent words, does Mlle V appear 'pasted onto a tipped up, spatially unconvincing ground'?[6] Why is the background broadly-brushed while the matador is smoothly painted? Why did Manet take the picador motif from a print by Goya rather than invent one himself? These are all acknowledged problems which many scholars have wondered about. They are important because anything seemingly illogical in great art needs explanation. Can it be coincidence that *one* answer makes all *seven* 'inconsistencies' logical and that it is the same answer that makes sense of *Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe*? The matador

is distinct and separate from the background because she represents the 'artist' who is *painting* the background with a pink 'palette' in one hand and a 'brush' in the other. The basic shape of her cape, less the hanging portion, is the shape of an oversized palette with her unseen thumb penetrating where the thumb-hole would be (fig. 6). The sword is a brush. The artist/matador turns away from her canvas while in the act of painting the top left hand corner. The picador motif was taken *directly* from Goya because the background represents a *Spanish* painting. That is why it is more broadly brushed. It is a 'painting' while Victorine is 'real'. Alan Bowness has observed how Manet tried to shrink the perceived distance between the matador and the bull without realizing that the bull is on a backdrop: '[Manet] was trying to relate, *on a single plane,* the bull-fighting scene in the middle distance and Victorine's arms in the foreground [italics added]'.[7] Even her shadow stretches so far into the arena that once again, just as in Courbet's *Stonebreakers*, we are left with the impression that the background is nearby and vertical, which it is.


Fig. 7 *Mlle V* …(detail)


Fig. 8 Forestier, Copy after Ingres' *Self-Portrait* (inverted)

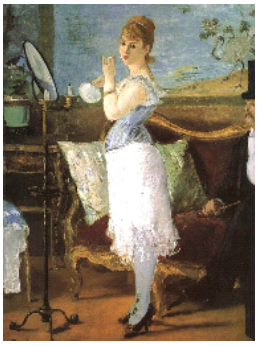
Fig. 9 *Nana*

Manet, it has long been known, was a master at mixing multiple references to earlier painting into one image. Here the matador's cape also refers to Ingres' early self-portrait in which the artist wipes the canvas with a cloth (figs. 7-8).[8] *Mlle V*…was exhibited in 1863 next to *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* which will be discussed shortly but an analysis of *Nana*, a much later painting, will set the stage for looking at all Manet's art in a different light (fig. 9).

Fig. 10 Poussin, *Self-portrait*

Fig. 11 *Nana* (detail)

Fig. 12 Poussin, *Self-portrait* (detail inverted)

Fig. 13 *Nana* (detail)

Fig. 14 Poussin, ***Self-portrait*** (detail)

Nana the courtesan, it has never been shown, derives from Poussin's *Self-portrait* in the Louvre (figs. 11-12); both figures, their heads slanting back, turn to look outwards with a hand close to their chests curling down. Nana's customer is cropped in profile at the edge of the canvas *behind* her just as Poussin's personification of Painting is cropped in profile at the edge of a canvas *behind* him (figs. 13-14).

Fig. 15 *Nana* (detail)

Fig. 16 Copy after Ingres' *Self-portrait* (detail inverted)

Nana looks like a view of modern life but sight is deceptive. Manet makes that clear in a pun, just as Courbet did with *courbé* in *The Stonebreakers*. Nana, you should see, is *painting* her face just as Poussin does his in the self-portrait. She is an 'artist' and her figure is again based on Ingres' self-portrait (figs. 15-16).[9] The powder puff echoes Ingres' cloth while a finger on her other hand sticks out like Ingres' chalk. It is common when discussing Manet's boudoir paintings to note Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* in which cosmetics are discussed. Yet one should also

cite Alberto di Arnoldo, a fifteenth-century sculptor, who argued that 'the best painters in Florence were its women, who corrected the errors of the greatest of painters, God, with their cosmetics.' [10]

Fig. 17 *Le Bain*, subsequently known as *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe (Luncheon on the Grass)*.

When Manet sent his greatest masterpiece to the *Salon des Refusés,* he named it *Le Bain* (fig. 17). Since no-one except great masters understood why it was called *The Bath*, it has ever after been known as *Luncheon on the Grass*, a trap out of which viewers have been unable to extricate themselves. *The Bath* is the more appropriate description; the other is quite misleading.

Fig. 18 *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* or *Le Bain* (detail)

Fig. 19 Raimondi, *The Judgment of Paris* (detail)

While the derivation of three figures from a print after Raphael is well known, it is rarely noted that Manet changed the direction of the head of the man at left to resemble the self-portrait of another artist (figs. 18-19).[11] Since the model actually was an artist, a sculptor called Ferdinand Leenhof, let us assume that he represents an 'artist', a painter like the matador. Victorine Meurend, who had appeared in *Mlle V* and other paintings, was by then a recognized model but all three figures appear like a group in a studio. Anne Coffin Hanson described Victorine as a model 'resting between poses'. Françoise Cachin commented that 'the landscape...is treated in a very casual way, sketched with the brush like a stage set behind the models, who quite obviously are posing in the studio.' Armstrong described the painting as 'a not-very-veiled evocation of the painter's world of the studio'.[12]

Fig. 20 *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* or *Le Bain* (detail)

Since those posing on the left were actually an artist and a model and are likely to be so in the painting, the principal man might also be an 'artist'. Richard Wollheim thought that he is and Courbet often used *two* artists to represent one (see figs. 1, 4).[13] Both Manet's brothers are said to have taken turns posing for the figure. Since I will show elsewhere that Manet did not choose his models haphazardly, he may well have intended to give the man a family resemblance; to resemble *a* Manet without matching Manet himself. Furthermore, his extended arm with raised thumb somewhat recalls how an artist measures a model's proportions. Whether or not this is so, if we assume for the moment that the man is another artist an insight can be gained that, in hindsight, will confirm the identification.

Fig. 21 *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* or *Le Bain* (detail)

Fig. 22 Detail of fig. 21

George Mauner has pointed out that his hand connects the two women in that his thumb curls up towards the bather while his finger points at the model (figs. 21-22).[14]

Fig. 23 *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* or *Le Bain*

What has not been recognized is that the model *is* the bather! The 'artists' and model are relaxing *in front* of a canvas that she has already posed for. The bather's figure is out of proportion because it is not 'real'; it is part of another canvas. The background is a 'painting' called *Le Bain*, thus explaining Manet's title which until now has not made sense.[15] It is a dream-world where the studio and the painting have been fused. This is not supposition but can be proved. The lighting, for instance, is contradictory. The foreground is lit from behind us, by implication a window; the background from above, that is 'painted' sunlight. The 'two' women share the same hairstyle with an *identical* parting and hairline, though Manet darkened the bather's hair to disguise the similarity. Their earrings are the same color and size and hang precisely the same distance from the earlobe. They have the same body types and the bather's spread hand clutching the fabric near her groin resembles the placement of Olympia's hand, again posed for by Victorine (figs. 24-25). The 'live' model is clearly painted from life while the 'painted' bather, as Armstrong noted, 'is clearly lifted from art.'[16] Lastly, the white fabric discarded nearby is logically the dress the model wears in the 'painting'.

Fig. 24 *Le Déjeuner*… (detail) Fig. 25 *Olympia* (detail)

The illusions of Manet and Courbet are an age-old trick of the trade. If you have never seen a similar composition, your brain's neurons will have just fired in a novel pattern. When you see other examples, the same configuration will fire again. With use those neurons will become permanently primed and on the look-out for such tricks. You will then see similar images more easily. Everyone potentially can make their eyes simulate those of a great master but, to make them do so, most of us must change the way we think. A slight shift in perception can radically alter sight. Young minds, more flexible, will find this easier because, as Shunryu Suzuki warned: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."[17] Nevertheless, most people, if they persevere, will see what they have never actually seen: the art in great art.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

[1] Fried, *Manet's Modernism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press) 1992, pp. 105-6; see also Linda Nochlin, *Gustave Courbet: A Study of Style and Society* (New York: Garland, Outstanding Dissertation in the Fine Arts) 1976, pp. 149-50, cited in Fried, 1992, note 29, p. 314.

[2] Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press) 1990, p. 171

[3] Fried, "Courbet's Femininity" in *Courbet Reconsidered* (Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum) 1988, p. 45

[4] Fried, 1990, p.152

[5] Clay, "Ointments, Makeup, Pollen", *October* 27, 1984, p. 12; John Richardson has claimed that the discrepancy of scale between the background and foreground figures in many of Manet's paintings of the 1860s was the result of faulty design. See *Manet* (London: Phaidon) 1982, p.9

[6] Carol Armstrong, *Manet Manette* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) 2002, p. 149

[7] Alan Bowness, "A note on 'Manet's compositional difficulties", *Burlington Magazine* 103, June 1961, p. 277

[8] Ingres' self-portrait could have been known to Manet through an etching, a photograph or a number of copies and variants. See *Portraits by Ingres: Image of an Epoch* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1999, pp. 72-4.

[9] Although *Nana* is often linked to Baudelaire's section on make-up in *The Painter of Modern Life* or Zola's novel of the same name, it should not be forgotten that cosmetics have been found among the earliest of Neolithic remains. There is nothing particularly modern about painting a face and it is an activity that may well resonate deep within our psyche. In ancient Egypt palettes were used for cosmetics and their use in art may well be a later development.

[10] Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1951, p.3, citing Franco Sacchetti.

[11] The self-portrait in question will be revealed in a forthcoming book.

[12] Anne Coffin Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) 1977, p.95; Françoise Cachin, Manet 1983, p.167; Armstrong, "To Paint, To Point, To Pose: Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*" in *Manet's Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, ed. P.H.Tucker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1998, p.92; Elizabeth Anne McCauley, "Sex and the Salon: Defining Art and Immorality in 1863" in *Manet's Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, p.62; Giacomo Mesnil, "*Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* di Manet ed *Il Concerto Campestre* di Giorgione", *L'Arte* 37 1934, p.255; Beatrice Farwell, *Manet and the Nude: A Study in Iconography in the Second Empire* (New York: Garland, Outstanding Dissertation in the Fine Arts) 1981, p.198. Of the additional references above, Mesnil noted in 1934 that the nude woman looked like a model in a studio and Farwell described the scenery as 'a photographer's backdrop'. A contemporary critic complained that the man stretching out had not bothered to take his cap off out-of-doors. The intentional incongruity is yet another indication that the scene is set indoors. Théophile Thoré, cited in Harrison, 2005, p. 47.

[13] Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1987, p. 246

[14] Mauner, *Manet: Peintre-Philosophe*, *A Study of the Painter's Themes* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press) 1975, p.19

[15] This interpretation also explains why the title is *The Bath* and not *A Bath*. The definite article refers to the painting. Separately, our visual system uses a hard-wired rule known by scientists as Size Constancy, which assumes that objects do not change size even as they move towards us. This allows us, for instance, to catch a ball and judge distance by size. What it prevents us from doing easily is recognizing the bather in *Le Déjeuner* as close by and in proportion. Manet has used a rule of the visual system *against* us in order to heighten our aesthetic appreciation. For size constancy, see Vincent Walsh and Janus Kulikowski, "Seeing color" in *The Artful Eye*, ed. Richard Gregory et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1995, p. 269.

[16] Armstrong, 2002, p.152; Armstrong also argued that Victorine *posed* for the bather but not that Victorine *is* the bather. The difference is fundamental. Not recognizing that the background is 'painted' she joined legions of scholars in criticizing Manet's poor handling of landscape and noted that Victorine's double-duty in the painting is 'a meditation on the gendering of subject-object relations and the differentiation between self and other so fundamental to the construct of the "person"' (ibid., pp. 24, 152).

[17] Cited in G. Johnson, 1991, p. 154