

Sight Unseen: How Every Painter Paints Himself

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Chapter

2

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Chapter Two

“Painting” in Art

'Meaning is for those who are ready for it, for those who are trained for it. The rest get pretty pictures.'

Les Bursill, Aboriginal artist

Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso, all of them *artists*, saw *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* as described in the first chapter; all *writers* on art have always seen “a luncheon on the grass”. Space here allows only an analysis of Picasso’s observations. He did over 225 variations after *Le Déjeuner* so it is not surprising that in some his grasp of Manet’s conception is readily apparent, even if he may have preferred to prolong the secret. There is no record of him having shared his knowledge with friends.



Fig. 1 Picasso, *Sketch after Manet's Le Bain*, Sketchbook 131, p.1

In a 1954 sketchbook of Picasso’s there is a drawing on the first page in which he surrounds the bather with straight lines, supposedly trees and water (fig. 1). They double as a frame for Manet’s ‘painting’ within the painting.



Fig. 2 Picasso, *Heads from Le Bain*, Sketchbook 131, p.4



Fig. 3 Picasso, *After Self-portrait by Delacroix*, Sketchbook 131, p. 5

The fourth page displays the heads of Manet's 'artists', his model Victorine and the *painted* figure (fig. 2). On the next page, though, is a sketch after Delacroix's self-portrait (fig. 3) which suggests that Picasso had artists in mind when drawing Manet's figures.¹ He even turned Victorine's head more to the left in his drawing to match the mirror of Delacroix's (figs. 4-6). He must have known that Victorine in *Mlle V* and other paintings was an 'artist'.

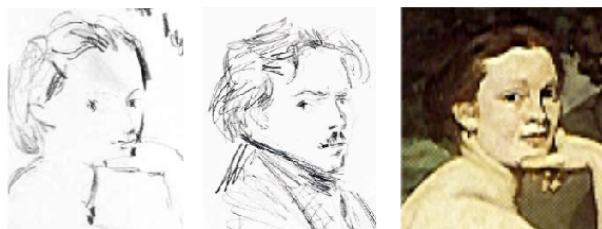


Fig. 4 Detail of fig. 2 Fig. 5 Detail of fig. 2, inverted Fig. 6 *Le Déjeuner* (detail)



Fig. 7 Picasso, *Bathers*



Fig. 8 Picasso, sketch for *La Vie* (detail)

Picasso first saw Manet's painting in 1900.² As early as 1908 there is a sketch of a wood in which the reclining figure extends a hand towards a drawing (fig. 7). It is a previously unknown variation on *Le Déjeuner*. The image in the middle actually refers to Manet's *Fishing* but shows a figure bending over water like the bather. Reclining in the foreground the androgynous nude, like Picasso's Victorine, becomes an artist. As proof, an earlier sketch for *La Vie* shows Picasso pointing to a painting in like manner (fig. 8).



Fig. 9 Picasso, Untitled etching dated 9.4.70



Fig. 10 Detail of Fig. 9

In a late etching, an acknowledged variation on *Le Déjeuner*, Picasso again displayed his understanding of the original. He links the voyeur with a pipe in the ‘painting’, clearly an artist, to the artist outside it with a brush, just as Victorine is both inside and outside the ‘painting’ (figs. 9-10).³



Fig. 11 Picasso, *The Painter at Work*

In another example Manet’s lounging figure is transformed into an artist sitting on the floor (fig. 11); Victorine’s features are in the bust on the right. On the left a nude, said by others to resemble

Manet, looks over his shoulder. Picasso thus included *two* artists, just as Manet did. This recalls Picasso's habitual remark that when he painted he imagined all the great masters in the studio watching him from behind.⁴ Another drawing by Picasso also depicts an artist behind an artist (fig. 12). In drawing Manet nude Picasso correctly assumed, as in his sketchbook when he modeled Victorine after Delacroix, that the nude Victorine is both artist *and* model, a more complex idea explained later. Picasso, it now seems, did not give free rein to his imagination when composing his variations on great paintings. He understood their hidden meaning and reconfigured them in accordance with their original conception.



Fig. 12 Picasso, *Painter and His Model* (16th Nov. 1970)



Fig. 13 *Soap Bubbles*



Fig. 14 *Interior at Arachon*



Fig. 15 *The Smoker*

There are other examples in Manet's art of figures posed like painters as long as one ignores the apparent scene. Léon Leenhof, often thought to be Manet's son and whom Manet probably again used for the family resemblance, seems to focus in two paintings on a point close by while 'painting' a detail on a canvas that we cannot see (figs. 13-14). Looking at the bubble-blower with the background

excluded helps convey the underlying scene (fig. 17). The gesture is seen again in *Smoker* and *Corner of a Café-Concert* if one ignores the pipes, which as in the Picasso are used for their resemblance to a brush and as symbols of inspiration (figs. 15-16 and see Chapter Two, p.3 above). The older smoker paints the canvas from within.



Fig. 16 *Corner of a Café-Concert*



Fig. 17 Cut-out of *Soap Bubbles* (a painter at work)



Fig. 18 Sketch for *Interior at Arachon*

If the gestures alone do not convince, a sketch for *Interior at Arachon* survives as further evidence (fig. 18). Here Léon (the artist) and his ‘work-table’ are darker, existing on a different level of reality to the rest of the scene. His son’s figure is also unrealistically large compared to Manet’s wife, a discrepancy comparable to the inconsistency of scale in *Le Déjeuner*, but ‘corrected’ in the painting to allow Leon’s gesture and the silhouette of his chair’s legs to carry the meaning. The legs, incidentally, spell the letter ‘M’, for Manet.



Fig. 19 *Boy Carrying a Tray*



Fig. 20 *The Balcony*

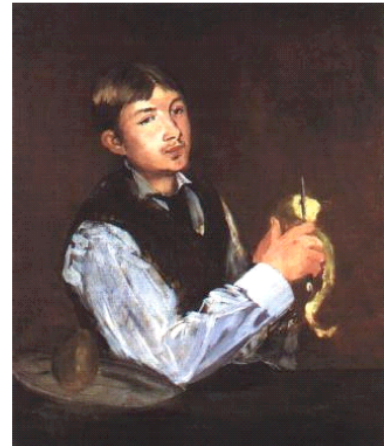


Fig. 21 *Young Man with a Pear*

Léon also appears in a print by Manet based on a painting by Titian thought to be of Titian's daughter. The pose suggests that he is selecting paint from his tray/palette and is about to apply it to the sheet of paper we are looking at (fig. 19). Anyone who has seen an artist at work should be able to recognize the accuracy of Manet's observation. The same figure appears again, hardly visible, in the dark background of *The Balcony* (fig. 20). He is separate from the other figures and darker for the same reason that the foreground and background of *Le Déjeuner* are differentiated by facture. Léon is again an artist, now in the act of painting *The Balcony* from behind. Think of Picasso on film famously painting from the other side of a piece of glass or in a photograph with a flashlight (fig. 22). Later the hand of an older Léon is turned inward to match the artist's painting the picture, the knife positioned as Manet's brush would have been (fig. 21).

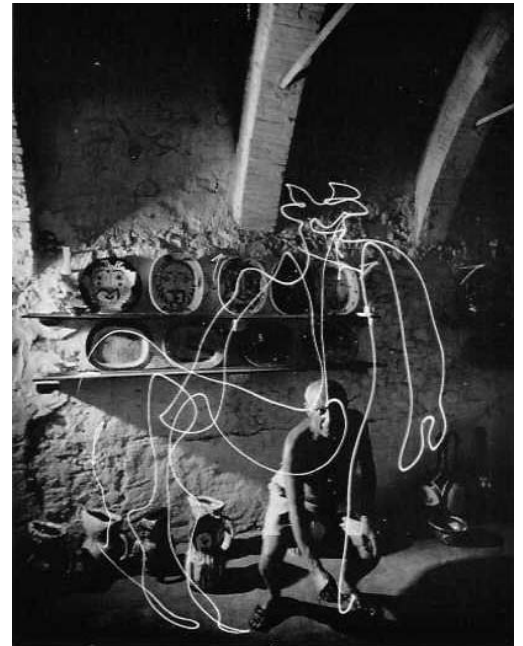


Fig. 22 Picasso painting with a flashlight



Fig. 23 *Young Lady of 1866*



Fig. 24 Detail of fig. 23



Fig. 25 Dürer, *Self-portrait at the Age of 22*

Other examples include Manet's *Young Lady of 1866*. The violets in Victorine's hand are significantly named after a color, one of the few flowers that are, and she is about to apply paint to the surface we are looking at. Her gesture resembles Léon's in *Interior at Arachon* viewed from a different angle (figs. 23-24). The monocle in her other hand, then a male accessory, was probably used by artists to examine paintings. It will be shown later that this unseen technique has been used by great masters for over half a millennia. Consider, for the time being, a self-portrait by Dürer (fig. 25). Surely he holds the pen that made the drawing?



Fig. 26 *The Railway*



Fig. 27 Titian, *Girl with a Fruit Dish*

Armstrong recently revealed that Manet's *Railway* (fig. 26) was inspired by a Berthe Morisot painting of a woman and child on a balcony.⁵ While Morisot's woman in her watercolor leans on a railing, her child looks through the bars and it is that child's eye view that Manet here adopts as his own. Manet, it has not been seen, used another figure by Titian, again thought to be Titian's daughter, for the girl's pose (fig. 27). Manet had used it as a source before, as others have shown. Even though the heads differ, the contours of their heads, their high waistbands and skirts describe similar silhouettes.⁶ Her left arm was lowered to resemble a painter's, like that of Eva Gonzales in an earlier painting (fig. 28). Manet's actual model was the daughter of another painter, Alphonse Hirsch. Doubly descended from daughters of painters, the girl in line with Manet's other works must be an 'artist'. Her 'painted' railings derive from a *female* painter, Morisot, which thus explains the somewhat unlikely source. Manet's grapes at right, out-of-place outdoors and seemingly irrelevant, achieve relevance only once the fusion of a studio and canvas is recognized. The grapes signal that the scene is indoors.⁷

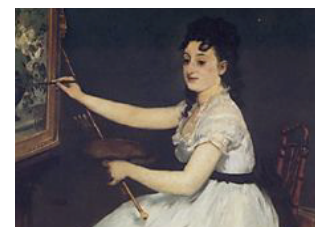


Fig. 28 *Portrait of Eva Gonzales* (detail)



Fig. 29 *Before the Mirror*



Fig. 30 Morisot, *Woman at her Toilette*

Another painting derived from Morisot and displaying her facture has been called Manet's homage to her art (figs. 29-30).⁸ What Manet has done, though, is secretly add another layer of meaning. His woman stands in a pose characteristic of a painter in front of a canvas (mirror) just as he had literally painted Eva Gonzales painting a few years earlier (figs. 31-32). With a cloth in one hand, Manet's later 'artist' stands ready to wipe the 'canvas' as Ingres does in his self-portrait (Chapter One, fig. 8). By imitating Morisot's calligraphic brushstrokes in the mirror, Manet pretends that the woman is painting a self-portrait. She is a surrogate for Morisot who, in turn, is always a surrogate for himself. The wit is wicked because if Morisot was flattered by her 'influence' on Manet, she would have been mistaken.

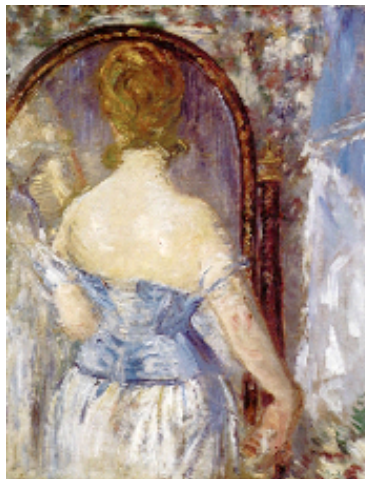


Fig. 31 *Before the Mirror* (1877)



Fig. 32 Detail of *Eva Gonzales in Manet's Studio* (1870)



Fig. 33 *View of the Universal Exhibition*

Manet's ability to vary his theme is astonishing. In the *View of the Universal Exhibition* which is described as a *viewing* and an *exhibition* spectators examine the 'painted townscape' which explains why Manet eliminated the Seine which, in reality, runs between the foreground and the background (fig. 33). The horsewoman in the painting below also turns away from the canvas as Manet the artist would have (fig. 34). She must be using her whip to 'paint' the trees because the background is 'unfinished' even though Manet signed the canvas.



Fig. 34 *The Amazon*



Fig. 35 Argenteuil



Figs. 36-37 Details of Manet's *Portrait of Eva Gonzales* (above) and fig. 35 (below)

Argenteuil is often said to be influenced by Impressionism though the truth is more complex. It pretends to be Impressionist just as *Before the Mirror* imitates a picture by Morisot. A contemporary caricaturist named the two figures 'Manet and Manette' and described the Seine behind as a 'blue wall' (fig. 35) Armstrong, whose recent book is titled *Manet Manette* agrees that the background 'flatten[s] the picture out'. She also noted that the couple sit in a very poor rendition of a boat which functions as the painting's frame.⁹ The 'flat' background is, of course, a 'painting' and the foreground ledge is partly in the studio. The man's cane is a 'mahlstick', practically identical to one Eva Gonzales holds in an earlier painting by Manet (figs. 36-37). Like the grapes in *The Railway* or the nude in *Le Déjeuner*, Manet purposely made the boat 'fail' to make pictorial sense. He left the Seine out of the *Universal Exhibition* for the same reason. The awkward passages are needed to create the puzzle. Without them the hidden meaning would remain a thought in Manet's mind and the images would be lifeless. With them, no surface description, such as describing *Le Déjeuner* as an outdoor picnic, is entirely logical.

Until now other explanations have been used for these odd features while lesser artists have often imitated them without understanding. The ‘flatness’ of Manet’s paintings is usually considered a stylistic element or, in Greenbergian theory, as an emphasis on the medium itself. The look was so often imitated that flatness actually became a characteristic of modernist style!¹⁰ Spectatorship too, a much discussed element in Manet’s work, has more to do with looking at art than the *flâneur* in Baron Haussmann’s new Paris. One common criticism that would have further amused and pleased him is that he had little talent for landscape. He never let on, of course, that his ‘landscapes’ are either *paintings* of landscapes or dreams but not landscapes themselves.¹¹ Nor did he point out that the factual errors that Charles Baudelaire and others ‘discovered’ were not errors at all, though they led to the widespread belief that meaning did not matter to him.

The correct and mistaken observations of prior scholars have been of enormous help in writing this book. The correct, of course, were helpful because they were right but the mistakes were often more valuable. Every time I read, for instance, that Manet had made an error, that the figure was ‘flat’, that such-and-such an object was poorly painted, that the scene made no sense, I was directed to a point-of-entry into the picture’s hidden theme. Uncovering the logic in Manet’s art is a very small step. Inside his art, unexplored, is a vast repository of knowledge acquired through poetic imagination.



Fig. 38 *Racing at the Bois de Boulogne*



Fig. 39 *Races at Longchamp*

The true subject, though not the content, of Manet's art might have been revealed long ago if viewers were not so ready to accept the customary habits of perception. A few years before Manet painted *Racing at the Bois de Boulogne* in 1872 he became the first person to depict a horserace head-on in a modern manner (fig. 38-39). Yet he later composed this pack of horses on the left in a dated style, all legs aloft. The group is very close to an actual composition by Géricault. 'Not being in the habit of painting horses', he tried to persuade Berthe Morisot, 'I copied mine from those who know best how to do them.'¹² In the corner, though, facing inwards is a painter of horse races, Edgar Degas, who, according to my theory, can only be 'painting' them. The large post by his shoulder, the most prominent, actually touches his 'composition' and is probably, like the tool in Courbet's *Stonebreakers*, a substitute for his brush. Degas' presence and the odd style has long been recognized so that the veil at this point between true and false descriptions of Manet's art is virtually transparent. Indeed the risk of his hidden theme being discovered during his lifetime was so great that he had to vary his tricks like a magician. This led writers to call his subject matter 'inconsistent', especially in relation to the work of his contemporaries, Monet and Degas. Yet he never changed his subject matter. Armstrong, to her credit, is the first scholar to emphasize the hidden *consistency* in Manet's 'inconsistency'. She wrote in her book published last year:

‘*The Railway*’s bifurcation of facture, space and psyche and its divided address to the viewer continue tendencies in Manet’s painting that went all the way back to the art-historical picnic of the *Luncheon on the Grass*; in the updated context of a rendering of a feature of the modern city; those characteristics of *The Railway* predict the famously fissured *Bar at the Folies-Bérgère*.’

The same is equally true of all the multi-figure compositions discussed here.¹³



Fig. 40 *Mlle V...*



Fig. 41 *Monk and Soldier*,
after Andrea del Sarto



Fig. 42 *A Bar at the Folies-Bérgère*

Even Manet’s early copies after the Old Masters are sometimes adjusted to assimilate a bifurcation between the foreground ‘artist’ and the background ‘canvas’. In the drawing above he abstracted two figures from the original to imply that the foreground monk is an artist (fig. 41).¹⁴ The compositional similarity to *Mlle V* in which a large figure dominates a background motif cannot be coincidental (fig. 40). The framed ‘mirror’ in *A Bar*, three decades later, is also as Armstrong notes, ‘a framed painting’, although she fails to explain the scene (fig. 42).¹⁵ The so-called mirror cannot be a mirror because, as is well-known, it does not accurately reflect the foreground. Underneath all Manet’s art there is more art, yet there is no evidence that any of Manet’s contemporaries, besides great masters like Cézanne, saw his work accurately. Manet was secretive and destroyed many drawings, almost certainly to cover his tracks. His recorded remarks also indicate that he misled his closest friends, including Berthe Morisot and Stephane Mallarmé, to a degree that might have disturbed them. Yet as a great master he had no choice. A comment by Robert Louis Stevenson helps explains why:

‘There is nothing more disenchanting to man than to be shown the springs and mechanisms of art...But these disclosures which seem fatal to the dignity of art seem so perhaps only in proportion to our ignorance...Those conscious and unconscious artifices which seem unworthy of the serious artist to employ, were yet, if we had the power to trace them to their hidden springs, indications of a delicacy of the senses finer than we conceive and hints of ancient harmonies.’¹⁶

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

¹ On the front *and* back cover of the sketchbook which includes Delacroix's portrait Picasso inscribed: 'First Drawings for Déjeuner sur l'Herbe.' The Delacroix portrait is thus clearly related. See Picasso, *Je Suis Le Cahier: The Sketchbooks of Picasso*, eds. A. Glimcher and M. Glimcher (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press) 1986, pp. 274-7, 336.

² Galassi, 1988, p. 188

³ The link between the artist and the voyeur in the painting has been made before without the true reason being recognized. See Karen Kleinfelder, *The Artist, The Model, His Image, Her Gaze* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press) 1993, pp. 84-5.

⁴ Hélène Parmelin, *Picasso Says...*, trans. C. Trollope (New York: A.S.Barnes & Co.) 1969, p. 40

⁵ Armstrong, 2002, pp. 203-4

⁶ Manet would have worked from an engraving after Titian's painting that has been discussed by Theodore Reff and Michael Fried in relation to another work by Manet (Fried, 1992, pp. 145-6). Although the heads of Manet's and Titian's figures face different directions, their silhouette is similar. In great art the form matters more than the detail.

⁷ The woman's role in *The Railway* will be explained elsewhere in the book.

⁸ Brettell, *Impression: Painting Quickly in France, 1860-1890* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) 2000, p.91

⁹ Armstrong, 2002, pp. 216-7

¹⁰ Great masters like Cézanne who used flattened perspective understood Manet's meaning but lesser artists almost certainly never have. Listen to Helen Frankenthaler, an influential artist of the late twentieth century:

'For example, I remember in the Fifties feeling that I didn't really understand Manet but when I went to galleries and museums with my friends, most would imply that Manet was sublime. But I just didn't get it. So I selected one or two of his works and thought, in my own language, I want to copy this and try and get lost; seeing and feeling what he's about. And after several of those exercises, successful and unsuccessful, I did get Manet and what he did for art: how his backgrounds melt into the foreground; the fact that there is no horizon line or wall line; how he flattened the surface and yet didn't flatten the surface. And I'm very grateful for that, because it makes looking at pictures more fun and opens up a lot of things. Cézanne was tremendously affected by Manet.' (Tim Marlow, "Making a message; giving a message" [Interview with Helen Frankenthaler], *The Art Newspaper* 104, June 2000, p.36).

T.J. Clark was the first writer, as far as I know, to recognize that Manet's 'flatness' must have some meaning, a view endorsed a decade later by Michael Fried. Neither, though, was able to provide a simple, specific explanation. See Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1984, pp. 12-13; Fried, 1992, pp. 16-17.

¹¹ In *Racing at the Bois-de-Boulogne* the background and the foreground are 'in the studio' while only the horses and jockeys are 'painted'.

¹² Richardson, 1982, p. 82

¹³ Almost all Manet's single full-figure compositions are of 'artists' as well. They are explained in the book.

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¹⁴ Other early drawings after the Old Masters which still survive have principal figures with their back to the viewer (figs. 43-4). Perhaps Manet was choosing those that he could represent as artists.



Fig.43 *Draped Figure* after
Andrea del Sarto



Fig. 44 *Three Child Dancers* after
Luca della Robbia

¹⁵ Armstrong, 2002, p. 286.

¹⁶ Cited in Jacques Shiner, "The Function and Origin of Form: A Preliminary on the Psychology of Aesthetics", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XVI, Sept. 1957, pp.66-75