

Manet's Reflection: Deconstruction of the Symbol of the Figure in Portraiture

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Abstract: *This paper delves into the realm of Manet's portraiture, focusing on the deconstruction of symbolic imagery within his works. Manet's anti-traditional approach to portraiture is scrutinized, highlighting his departure from traditional norms. By analyzing the symbolism embedded in the portrayal of nudity, garment effects, gender representations, and racial implications, this study unveils the intricate layers of meaning in Manet's portraits. The interaction and interplay of these symbolic elements are explored, shedding light on Manet's profound artistic vision and the broader social connotations encapsulated in his works.*

Keywords: *Manet; Portraiture; Anti-Traditional; Symbol of the figure*

1. Manet's Portraits: The Anti-Traditional Way

The French Impressionist painter Manet once said, "A portrait is a painting that takes a person to a place he himself has never been." In one of the most representative Impressionist masters - French painter Manet's portraits, in addition to the typical portrait elements (such as the appearance of the depicted person, character, and the performance of their social status), many details and elements need to be extended and analyzed in depth. Therefore, this paper will start with Manet's typical portraits to explore the symbolic techniques, artistic expressions, and their reflective significance.

1.1. Manet as an Artist

As we all know, portrait painting is a kind of painting art form that mainly portrays people's images. It is not only the result of the artist's capture and expression of the depicted person's appearance, form, character, spirit, and other aspects but also the carrier of social, political, cultural, and other aspects of information. However, the various symbols used in portraits, as well as the cultural, historical, and social information behind these symbols, often require in-depth interpretation and understanding to realize their significance.

As an Impressionist painter, Manet's portraits not only make breakthroughs and innovations in artistic form and modeling but also have unique thinking on emotional input and anti-traditional concepts. To incorporate subjectivity, independent aesthetics, and personal sensibility into the portrayal of portraits, he attempted to subvert the prevailing aesthetic ideals in portraiture at the time.

1.2. Characteristics and influences of the anti-traditional style of portraiture

Manet believed that the "ideal" characters portrayed in traditional portraits were too straightforward and rigid, and could not truly express the deep emotions and strength of the characters. Therefore, he chose to focus on the expression of vitality and sense of scene in his portraits, to make the depicted person vivid and concrete. For example, in Figure 1 Portrait of Irma Brunner and the Olympia, Manet did not place the depicted person in the traditional walking board or static posture, but expressed her mobility and vitality through free and casual bending posture and hand movements, thus breaking the image of "nobility and coldness" in traditional portraits. Secondly, Manet embodies the challenge to the surface of traditional portraits through the artistic treatment of costumes and backgrounds. In Portrait of Irma Brunner, he uniquely dressed the depicted person in minimalist clothing and presented a blurred scene in the background, which far exceeded the social perception of "elegance" and "vulgarity" at that time and was more in line with the character's life in the contemporary era. This approach goes far beyond the social perception of "elegance" and "vulgarity" of the time and is more in line with the

reality of the characters' lives in the contemporary context.



Figure 1: Manet, Portrait of Irma Brunner, 1880

As a result, Manet often adopted a self-examining approach when confronted with traditional portrait symbols to more accurately express the character and personality of his subjects. For example, in the painting *Japanese Dog*, Manet skillfully used a small dog as an interface to present to the audience the real image of the person depicted, thus breaking the traditional convention of only letting the depicted person appear alone. To summarize, Manet's unconventional approaches to portrait painting include the following: focus on authenticity, sense of scene and mobility, break through the constraints of traditional concepts, and take the character as the main body rather than the clothing; break the stereotype of "noble and cold" in portrait painting, and reveal to the audience the grace and gentleness that have been hidden by the traditional portrait; additionally, use the background and clothing elements to convey the true image of the depicted person more freely. The depicted person's modern aesthetic notions are more freely expressed through the use of background and apparel elements. Certain non-traditional portrait symbols also convey more comprehensive, realistic, and humanistic characteristics. All of these concepts are vividly presented in Manet's paintings as an anti-conformist and pragmatic approach to portraiture.

2. Deconstruction of figure symbols in portraiture

Analyzing the elements of nudity, figure garment, gender, and race in the portraits, reveals how Manet breaks through the traditional aesthetic concepts and gives the portraits richer connotations. He skillfully creates vivid, realistic images and challenges conventional symbolic interpretations with spontaneous gestures. This deconstructive scrutiny leads readers to an in-depth understanding of the modernity, freedom, and authenticity that his works appeal to, highlighting Manet's new interpretation of traditional portraiture.

2.1. Symbolism of nudity and garment

2.1.1. Modernity considerations of nude images

Referring to one of George Elgar Hicks' paintings of a couple, *The Bloodlines of Old England*, Lynne Nyde points out that the definitions of class and gender are crucial to the painting's representation of the foundations and future of England. Class, conflict, and difference were eliminated, and an image of family-centered unity and shared values was offered.[1] The female body then became a powerful symbol that signaled the inextricable connection and unity of these two aspects. The classical female nude, whether in painting or sculpture, is a significant achievement of this symbolic potency. If Hicks' 1857 painting embodied the full bourgeois idea of class and gender, Manet's 1864–1865 paintings subverted the form.

Concerning the nude, traditional portraiture tends to present a quest for the idealization of the human body, and achieves this through technical recreation. Manet's portraits, however, do not obscure the nudity of the depicted, but rather depict it while maintaining a sense of realism and respect. He deliberately presents the details of muscle texture, folds, bones, and other physiological structures, making the nude body a natural, artistic symbol that expresses inner emotions and personality traits. For instance, in *The Luncheon on the Grass*, Manet boldly depicts the female nude and creates a fresh image of a woman against a very straightforward yet beautiful background by combining color and

creating a dignified yet appealing environment.

As shown in Figure 2 Olympia, Manet depicts the body of the protagonist nakedly. This means that Manet tries to get rid of the prudishness about nudity in traditional portraiture, and lets the viewers see the reality and vitality of nudity by exposing the natural and physiological state of human beings. Clark states that “class is the essence of Olympian modernization.” The painting alters and plays with identities that culture wishes to keep static, most notably the nude and the prostitute, which is the main reason it proved to be so unpopular. [2] Olympia is differently positioned within the discourse of modernity, gender, and sexuality in the modern world. John Berger uses Olympia to mark its distinction from the nudes typical of Renaissance Western art. Focusing on Olympia’s self-control, he contrasts her with the classical European nude, which he sees as passive, supine, and a captive of the male predatory gaze.



Figure 2: Manet, Olympia, 1863

2.1.2. Characterization by anti-traditional Garment Choices

For the effect of figure clothing, traditional portraits usually use clothing as an important element to reflect identity, status, and aesthetic concepts. But in Manet’s portraits, the material, luster, and structure of the costumes become part of the artistic expression. For example, in the painting Portrait of Monsieur and Madame Auguste Manet, the dark clothes worn by the women depicted create a strong attraction, showing the details of the material and its adjustments from different angles, and conveying the elegance of introspection and not ostentation; while the men use the deep touch of black and the softer suits, and then add more details, such as pockets, pleats, etc., to make the subject of the painting. The men, on the other hand, use a deeper touch of black against the softer suits, and add more details such as pockets and pleats to make the depicted objects a perfect blend of spiritual power and life forms. In Olympia, the heroine strikes a challenging and rebellious pose with reserve, while the loose beige floral silk gown, ribbon collar, and beige silk slippers she lifts with one hand subvert the elegance of traditional Western portraiture and emphasize the importance of clothing in subtly reflecting her individuality. In The Luncheon on the Grass, the men are depicted in Svensk clothing and golf hats, which are skillfully matched to reflect the rigidity and non-appearance of the aristocratic life, but also the lightness and fluidity of the painting. As for the women depicted in the picture, the delicate and simple muted colors are dominant, making the depicted objects more spiritually beautiful than materially beautiful, and combining the enjoyment of the natural scenery and the pleasurable time of life.

2.2. Reconstruction of Gender Symbols

2.2.1. Gender in Manet’s Portraits

Observing the two paintings Olympia and The Luncheon on the Grass, we can find that Manet not only abandoned the shackles of traditional portraits on the idea of male power and female weakness but also added the idea of “flipping gender roles” in his works. In Olympia, the female protagonist conveys an invasive power through her frankness and self-confidence, and the sharp gaze in her eyes and her no-nonsense attitude together form a subversive portrait. The Olympia that Manet describes - as a recognizable bit of modern young womanhood - isn’t pure either; it’s a complex cultural construct. If she seems so real, it is because one sees self-construction within one’s own constructed self. Whether modern audiences can look at her in this way is, of course, unknown at this point. Since 1865, so much has been written about the deconstruction of gender that what shocked or disconcerted people in Manet’s time seems to us to have diminished in magnitude. [13] Accustomed as we are to the conventions deployed by such modernist works, we may find a depth of form that is easier to see.

In Figure 3, the Luncheon on the Grass, on the other hand, there is a strong emphasis on the female portrayer’s demeanor and physical attributes as the victor, in addition to the perceived disadvantage of

the normal male authority in dominating life. Any sensual attire, free movement gestures, and interpersonal interactions present the social skills and resilience of the women. In his portraits, Manet portrayed women's strong social skills and resilient personality traits. Through the meticulous presentation of clothing, gestures, and character relationships, he reveals the unique temperament and cultural background of women.



Figure 3: Manet, *The Luncheon on the Grass*, 1863

2.2.2. Gender Role Positioning and Symbolism

In terms of gender, traditional portraits tend to view men as representatives of social authority and elite groups, while women are portrayed as delicate and powerless “vases” and “housewives”. On the contrary, Manet’s portraits deconstruct gender differences and social experiences such as identity and family roles, providing more space for individualization and free play for both men and women.

The ambivalence of this ideological construction becomes apparent if we return to the gender relations that are at the heart of this cultural configuration, as does the ambiguous position of women in classical bourgeois ideology. [4] The woman appears both above and below the man. On the one hand, she is a goddess whose body and favors provide men with access to a transcendent home in the world of values and relations of solidarity; on the other hand, she is a servant of men, and she is not placed by them in their thoughts.

2.3. Exploration of the meaning of race

In terms of race, traditional portraiture is often prone to show the racial superiority or vulnerability of the group in which the person depicted is a member, the topicality of speculation about the boundaries between species and races, and the expectation that the salon nude must conform to an ideal type of young, beautiful person.

However, in Manet’s work, dress-up and skin color do not become barriers on the path to portrayal. He created racial identity fluidity in the subjects depicted. In *Olympia*, Manet not only depicts the body of the protagonist, but a black maid stands next to the protagonist, emphasizing the undercutting of skin color to the essential nature of the artistic image and the communal nature of the essential presence of human flesh. Black modeling has been a topic of conversation lately regarding race and representation. Theodore Reeve first articulated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of race, as well as literary and artistic representations of black women, which inspired Manet to include the model named Raoul. [5]

Griselda Pollock, in an essay directed primarily at Gauguin, rediscovers Raoul from her disappearance from Manet’s literary work and introduces the idea that *Olympia* negates Orientalist ism by breaking down the dichotomy between the white French mistress and the black African servant, both of whom could be read as Parisian career women. Manet, as a member of the realist movement led by Courbet, also promoted free associations of ugliness, animals, depravity (whether of class or race), and sexual excess. In 1866, shortly after the *Olympia* scandal, the *Journal de Presse* serialized a story by Frédéric Bouyer that blended early stories about the union of apes with the legend of the gorilla, debates about human evolution and racial differences, and French colonial life.

3. Interaction of various symbolic elements

3.1. Conflict and Unity between Symbolic Elements

The various symbolic elements mentioned above do not appear singularly in Manet’s works but are

manifestations of Manet's continuous exploration and generation in his artistic path. The symbolic elements may seem to conflict with each other, but this is exactly what Manet wants to express. Through the modern form and content, he transforms some feelings and phenomena in the real world, which may not be explained, into paintings, and "simulates" the world in the paintings. In *The Luncheon on the Grass*, Manet painted a dove above the bathers, the dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, so the bathers in the image are not just taking a bath but cleansing their souls, and the conflict between the two creates a conflict in which Manet does not just condemn Paris but also includes the attitude of a bystander who sees modernity as a blessing as well as a degradation. Manet's work is not only an artistic expression but also an examination of the social, cultural, and ethical concepts of the time. Through the skillful collision and unification between symbolic elements, he reveals the complex emotions and thoughts within human beings. This conflict becomes a unique aesthetic expression in his works, leading the viewer to go beyond the surface and think deeply about the truth and essence of the real world.

3.2. Transformation and evolution of symbolic elements

Lyon and Morrisseau appear several times in Manet's portraits, Morrisseau the most and Lyon the second. However, Manet's treatment of both of them and the presentation of the same person at different stages of his life reflect the transformation and evolution of the aforementioned symbols in Manet's anticlimactic portraits. When Lyon was six or seven years old, Manet painted a picture of him titled *Boy with a Sword*, which was a weapon of male power and social hierarchy compared to the young boy, and from the way Lyon holds the sword in the painting and Manet's direct narration, it seems that the sword is a burden to Lyon. By 1868, however, another Manet work, *Noon*, shows Lyon looking up into the distance, situated next to a very large sword and a huge suit of armor, at which point Lyon has been relieved of his burdens, and he can go on from there to explore a future of his own with a lighter load. In the stage of maintaining an intimate relationship with Morrisseau, Manet likewise makes good use of different elemental symbols for the presentation of the changing relationship. Morrisseau first appeared holding a fan in Manet's *Berthe Morrisseau with Fan* of 1872, where Manet skillfully reversed the relationship between looking and being looked at, with Morrisseau's provocative half-covering of his face with a fan in a reversal of the traditional portrait, where the model can only be gazed at silently by the painter. But in 1874, Manet painted another *Berthe Morisot with a fan*, at which time the fan, once a token between the two, returned to Morisot's hand again, except that this was the last portrait of Morisot, and along the direction of the fan, the ring worn by Morisot on his hand could be seen, implying that the relationship between the two had been suspended and that everything had been a sea change. It is Manet's deep love for Lyon and Morrisseau, he did not easily paint a portrait of conformity, but as a painter can give the best answer.

4. Conclusion

Through the review of the development of portrait painting and the analysis of Manet's portraits, we can see that these symbols as well as symbolic objects are not mere art forms, but a way of expression closely connected with human society and culture. In-depth exploration of portraits

An in-depth exploration of the cultural, historical, and social messages and meanings behind the symbols in portraits will help us better understand the essence and meaning of portraiture as an art form. It is only after truly understanding these inner messages that we can better feel the artistic beauty and emotional revelation that portraits bring.

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