

The Avant-Garde in the 19th Century



6.1 Thomas Couture, *The Romans of the Decadence*, 1847.

In 1847, **Thomas Couture's** immense painting *The Romans of the Decadence* became one of the most popular Salon paintings of the entire nineteenth century (6.1). Measuring over 15' by 25', the canvas stretches past the viewer's peripheral vision and achieves an almost wide-screen scale. Couture filled its carefully researched Roman architectural setting with life-size figures of, as the title makes clear, "decadent Romans." He employed just enough "realism" to enable the viewer's own imagination to transform the picture into an entire (cinematic) drama. The title not only served to suggest plot, it also allowed nineteenth century bourgeois viewers a sense of moral righteousness. The artist claimed his painting was a challenge to the decadence of

contemporary French society and its popularity was, at least in part, based on the indignation viewers could assume in relating the scene to what they considered the decrepitude of urban life during the Industrial Revolution.

Couture's immense canvas demonstrates the basic importance of Academic paintings. Socially, they were important precisely because they reflected the popular ideals and tastes of their upper middle class sponsors. Artistically, they showed (and still show) an impressive power for forcefully place the viewer within a scene or an event. This ability, according to the art historian Leo Rosenthal, was the main intention of the Academic painter's style: "Painting for them [the Academics] is only a medium: the interest of the picture does not depend on its aesthetic merit, but on the scene represented: the painter must be a clever dramatist, a good costume designer, an adroit stage director."¹

Couture's ostensible moral high ground is contradicted by the actual content of his painting. Although the characters in *Romans* are clearly participating in an orgy, they are all so attractive and erotically appealing that the image functions more as nineteenth century soft-porn than as a moral diatribe. Notice that the painting is composed formally much like Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (3.9) and Jacques Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1.13): the action occurs in a narrow stage-like space positioned parallel to the picture plane; the background is divided into three parts; the light enters from the upper left and moves down towards the lower right. "Reading" the painting in this direction, the first figure one encounters is a beautiful woman who rips her clothes off to reveal large, full breasts. Continuing down the diagonal, one sees a man fondling a reclining (and, again, beautiful) woman. He offers drink to another woman, who also reveals her naked breasts. The central reclining woman rests her feet in the lap

of a second man, who in turn strokes a third. Everyone is beautiful. Everyone is sexy. Everyone is having a lot of fun.

Under scrutiny, Couture's painting hardly resembles a moralizing sermon. Instead, it emerges as something closer to an episode of *Bay Watch* (the 1990s television series noted for its scenes of buxom, scantily clad women running slow-mo down the beach) or to an Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue (noted for its nude and semi-nude youths who seem to have very little to do with the clothing being sold). In spite of the artist's stated aims, the image titillates rather than criticizes. Such apparent hypocrisy led to accusations that the Academy had itself become decadent and artificial. Even as Couture painted *The Romans of the Decadence*, other artists began to rebel against the Academic standards.

Before we explore the art produced by these rebels, we will look further at the Academy tradition that honored Couture.

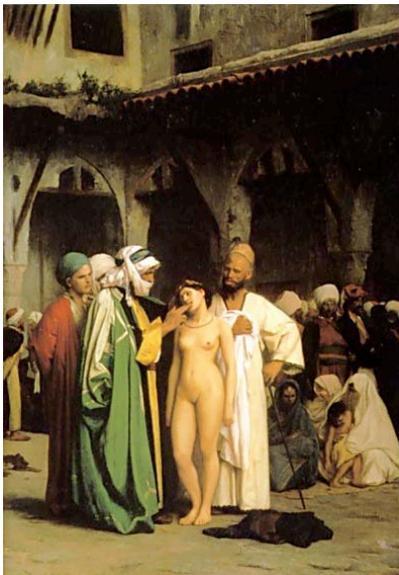
Gerome, Ingres & Orientalism

The Academic paintings of **Jean Leon Gerome** (1824-1904) **shows** a bold sense of color, a flair for historical detail, and a movie director's sense of staging. Indeed, Gerome's *Police Verso (Thumbs Down, 1872, Phoenix Art Museum, 6.2)* so impressed film director Ridley Scott that he decided to create a film with similar emotional impact: the result was his award-winning *Gladiator* (1999) starring Russell Crowe. Like *Gladiator*, many Hollywood films present history in same way Academic art does--sanitized, idealized, prettified and from a singular point of view.



6.2 Jean Leon Gerome, *Police Verso (Thumbs Down)*, 1872.

Gerome's *The Slave Market* (1867, **6.3**) presented an erotic image in the guise of a scene from nineteenth-century Islamic Egypt. He painted it with the sense of scientific detail and



6.3 Gerome, *Slave Market*, 1867.

detachment of a modern photographic essay. This superficial objectivity enabled Gerome to portray the woman as a commodity for sale—she is being inspected like a horse being auctioned at a fair. The public applauded *The Slave Market*. Like Couture's painting of the “decadent” Romans, its “scientific” accuracy was really veiled eroticism. It also supplied the added thrill to the Salon visitor of implying European superiority—Western culture forbade such treatment of women.

Gerome's *Slave Market* is a prime example of what Edward Said has called Orientalism. Palestinian-born Said was educated in Egypt under British rule and later became Professor of Literature at Columbia University. He turned his life experiences into a critical filter through which to view Western writings about and images of the East, especially the Near East. Said writes, "Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient...[T]his discourse is at once self-validating, constructing certain stereotypes which become accepted as self-evident facts, and also conscious of unconscious collusion with political and economic imperialism."²

As they visually consumed Gerome's woman, who was in turn being consumed by the painted buyer and seller, nineteenth century viewers of *The Slave Market* had gratified feelings of superiority along with an erotic thrill. Said argues that such images constitutes the "sign of the West's great cultural strength, its will to power over the Orient."³ Orientalism eliminated humanistic values in order to master its subject. To "capture it, treat it, describe it, improve it, and radically alter it," Orientalism turned the people of the Orient into passive objects of study.⁴

Many of **Ingres'** most famous paintings were Orientalist in nature. His *La Grande Odalisque* (1814, **6.4**) is a voluptuous portrayal of a nude woman posed as a harem girl. She reclines on a blue velvet bed with her back to the viewer, her head turned over her right shoulder to look out coyly and seductively. The Orientalist trappings of turban, pipe, and peacock feather fan exoticize the image, which has been described as "redolent of the enchantment of the Thousand and One Nights."⁵



6.4 Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814.

Painters continued to produce odalisque images into the twentieth century. Writing of **Henri Matisse's** odalisques from the 1920s, Marilyn Lincoln Board notes that odalisques reflected “European cultural attitudes about dominance and submission, because the colonial status of their ostensibly Oriental models clearly links their iconographic assumptions of sexual chauvinism to the wider political context of European imperialism.”⁶ In other words, odalisque images conflate racial and sexual content. Both areas need to be investigated.

The Male Gaze

Neither Gerome's slave nor Ingres' odalisque is simply the passive object of European Orientalism. They are passive *female* objects. In both cases, the presumed viewer is a heterosexual male. The numerous paintings of female nudes in Western art history, of women posed with their bodies displayed, have led scholars like John Berger to analyze what is termed “the gaze.” A look or stare heightened by desire, the gaze is never innocent or neutral. It confers power according to gender, with the female positioned as an object to receive the male gaze. As Berger writes, “The ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman

is designed to flatter him...men act, women appear.”⁷ In the words of art historian Carol Duncan, “unlike women, who are seen primarily as sexually accessible bodies, men are portrayed as physically and mentally active beings who creatively shape their world and ponder its meaning.”⁸ A preponderance of Western cultural images show men in action or men of action. Women generally appear—as the women of Gerome’s *Slave Market* and Ingres’ *Grande Odalisque* clearly do—as passive objects to receive the male gaze.

The male gaze is certainly implied in Ingres’ *The Turkish Bath* (1862, 6.5). Ingres crowded more than twenty nude figures into a corner of the harem’s quarters. Their puffy, sensuous bodies are positioned for maximum display amidst the requisite Orientalist symbols of turban and Turkish rug. British art historian Kenneth Clark praised *The Turkish Bath* as a “whirlwind of carnality” but failed to mention that most of the ostensibly Turkish harem slaves are blonde with pale eyes and ivory skin. Clark did, however, note the moral hypocrisy inherent in the positive public reception of Ingres’ painting, writing that the contradictory standard for sexual representation “seems to have been a necessary part of the façade behind which the social revolution of the nineteenth century could adjust itself. The unwritten code of physical respectability that was then produced seems at first to be full of inconsistencies, but analysis proves it to have had one overriding aim, to avoid the coarseness of truth.”⁹ One of the “truths” that Academic painting masked was exposed by Said’s theory of Orientalism. Other “truths” also masked by Academic art had to do with gender, class, and race.



6.5 Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*, 1862.

Academic painting was popular because it had the content of mass media art—dramatic stories, sex, violence, travelogues, soap operas, fantasy, and so forth. It presented this content in photographically realistic imagery that anyone would understand. The photographically detailed scenes that Academic painters made real enough for the entire public to enjoy did not include, however, facts that Salon visitors preferred not to see. If Academic paintings were the only visual record of the nineteenth century, it would appear to have indeed achieved the golden age

to which it aspired. The real social and artistic world of the nineteenth century, however, was far broader than the world glimpsed in the lustrous canvases of Ingres, Couture and Gerome. Their realism not only was not enough, it was ultimately deceptive. It disguised the revolutionary conflicts that affected both society and art at the time.

The historical period known as Modernism was born of such conflicts. Modernism was a primarily urban phenomenon made possible by the Industrial Revolution. New machines led to the mass production of cheap manufactured goods possible and a concomitant degeneration of quality. At the same time, the new art of advertising promised consumers utopian worlds that remained far out of the reach of urban laborers whose realities were rather bleak.

The factories that drew more and more people into European cities also led to increased pollution. Travelers to London, for example, commented on sooty air that was so dense on some days they couldn't see across the dark waters of the Thames River. Typhoid raged through narrow streets lined with gin-swilling prostitutes and homeless children begging for scraps of food.

The rise in population crowded the cities, exacerbated social tensions, and provoked unprecedented forms of criminal behavior. The most notorious mass murderer in Europe—Jack the Ripper—was a modern man.

There were no Academic paintings depicting the modern realities of poverty, crime and disease. Nor were there Academic paintings of the Europe-wide worker's revolt of 1848—at least from the worker's point of view.

Marx, Engels & the Revolution of 1848

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. They argued that the foundations of reality were based in the economics of the material world. In order

to redress the economic inequities of nineteenth century capitalism, they promoted class struggle between the proletariat (the working class or “the people”) and the bourgeoisie (the middle class elite). The 1848 Revolution “raised the dignity of labour to official status and the grandeur of *le people* (the people) to an article of faith.”¹⁰ A new art style—Realism—was born in its wake.

The socialist upheaval inspired French painter **Gustave Courbet** (1819-1877), who began to search for a means to connect with “the people.” As he wrote to a friend, “The people have my sympathies, I must address myself to them directly.” In 1848, knowing that stonebreaking was “the epitome of gratuitous, meaningless labour, the bottom of the manual heap,” Courbet crafted a monumental portrayal of two stonebreakers.

Gustave Courbet: Avant-garde Painter of Unwanted Facts

Gustave Courbet’s troubles with Academic painting arose primarily because he chose to present “unwanted” facts--without the comforting gloss of sentiment mastered by Academicians. He stated, “The art of painting can consist only in the representation of objects visible and tangible to the painter...I also hold that the painting is an essentially concrete art, and can consist only the representation of things both real and existing...Show me an angel and I will paint one.”¹¹ The middle class audience did not appreciate Courbet’s facts at all.

His painting *The Stonebreakers* (6.6) was totally unacceptable. It showed a boy assisting an older man in difficult but unskilled and repetitious manual labor. Courbet observed the scene with objectivity. The lack of emotion in the painting underscores the emptiness of the activity itself. The people in *The Stonebreakers* were not heroic embodiments of the new age: they were the passive victims of its forces. Courbet’s friend, the socialist Pierre Proudhon, described the old man in the painting this way:



6.6 Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers*, 1849-50.

“His motionless face is heartbreakingly melancholy. His stiff arms rise and fall with the regularity of a lever. Here indeed is the mechanical or mechanized man...in the state of ruin to which our splendid civilization and our incomparable industry have reduced him.” Proudhon went on to describe the boy: “This modern servitude devours the generations in their growth: here is the proletariat.”¹²

The embarrassment of these paintings resembled that in Charles Dickens’s description of “Coketown,” with its brutal picture of a mechanized labor force and social order. Courbet’s proletariat subjects--the rural poor--may not suffer from the filth and pollution of the nineteenth century cities. But Courbet reveals the dullness, the emptiness, of their existence in its stark reality.

By the standards of the Academy, Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans* (6.7) presents the world far too rudely. The faces of the people--portraits of Courbet’s friends in Ornans, his hometown--are weary and downright homely. Academic representations of the peasant class--on the rare

occasions when they occurred--were supposed to be romantically sweetened, cleaned up and prettified like a Disney cartoon. In contrast, Courbet presented the people and the landscape with the crudity and coarse surface of peasant life itself. His thick brushwork literally thrust the world of fact at the spectator, unmitigated by any reassuring charm. Ornans was a peasant town; nothing in the painting appealed to the middle-class image of the world or of themselves.



6.7 Courbet, *Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50.

Peasants had been acceptable sentimental subjects of small paintings since the genre scenes introduced by Dutch painters in the seventeenth century. But not only were Courbet's peasant's rudely unsentimental, their "insignificant" lives were blown up to the same scale as the mythological and historical paintings of the Salon. It was one thing for a ruler to condescend to fit his image to the scale of popular photographs; it was a revolutionary act for a painter to elevate peasants to the heroic scale of the emperor.

Even more than this rudeness, Courbet's painted world was a mote in the eye; it accused. Courbet's rudeness was a pictorial assault, a far too realistic mirror of precisely the facts of nineteenth century society that the middle class hoped, through the sentimental consolations and distractions of most Academic art, to ignore.

Courbet welcomed the hostility his paintings provoked in polite middle-class society. When his paintings were rejected from the Paris World's Fair of 1855, he set up his own "one-man show" nearby and entitled it "The Pavilion of Realism." The title was appropriate. His paintings underscored the cultural crisis that Academic painting disguised. His paintings showed the split in the new industrial society that kept the poor from sharing in the increasing prosperity of the middle and upper classes.

The centerpiece of this rebellious and defiant street exhibition was Courbet's only major symbolic work. Since it summed up his views of the true calling of the artist, he titled the painting *The Studio: A Real Allegory of the Last Seven Years of My Life* (6.8).



6.8 Courbet, *The Studio: A Real Allegory of the Last Seven Years of My Life*, 1854-55.

The left side of the painting is occupied by characters who gravitate from the shadow toward the light of the artist at work before his easel—Courbet himself. On the right are writers and colleagues whom Courbet sees as contributing to a more enlightened social vision. This group includes portraits of French poet Charles Baudelaire and Proudhon.

At the center of the painting, a nude female figure gazes over Courbet's shoulder. In Academic and traditional art, she would represent the inspiration of the Muses. In Courbet's painting, she is an ordinary woman; her feet are firmly on the ground, firmly in reality. The two children near the artist's easel are especially interesting. One child gazes at the artist at work. The other draws a figure on a piece of paper that resembles the drawings made by cartoonists to satirize the figures in Courbet's paintings. If children represent the future, the future clearly belongs to Courbet.

The precise meaning of the painting in all its detail has never been worked out. Its general message, though, is quite clear. The painting fits its title; it is an allegory, a symbolic representation of Courbet's life as an artist, including its meaning as a social and moral force. Courbet appoints himself, not to reflect the reigning social and artistic values, but to be "out front"—"avant-garde"—in changing those values.

Courbet served notice with this painting, appropriately shown in a rebel exhibition, that he took his role as an artist with a radically new seriousness. The artist must no longer paint pictures to match the vision of others. The artist must take the initiative in provoking social change. David had also hoped to change society through art, but his art had ultimately become propaganda for the state; most of all it was based on the ideas of others. Courbet, alone before his easel, places the artist as the originator—the seer—not the mere translator of approved visions.

Courbet relished his revolutionary role in the middle-class society. He called himself a "bohemian." In 1871 he joined the Communards, the socialists who attempted to take Paris and secede from France in order to form a socialist state. Courbet escaped execution when the Commune fell, though he did have to serve a term in jail and then go into exile.

Regardless of the validity of his particular social ideals, Courbet's self-proclaimed Realism unmasked the distorted "realism" of the Academic painters by revealing the inherent social and artistic instability underlying the culture of the nineteenth century. As Courbet's work showed, this instability stemmed from the existence of two segments that were outside middle-class culture and that represented potential social and cultural revolution and change: the proletariat, or working class, and the artistic avant-garde.

Saint-Simon & the Avant-Garde

The gap between what artists like Courbet produced and what public expected led to tension and hostility. Many artists faced popular rejection and harsh criticism in the press. But some critics championed the new artistic forms. They began to employ the term **avant-garde** to describe the directions the innovative artists were taking. Avant-garde is a French military term that can be literally translated as "advance guard." In the nineteenth century, the army sent "advance guards" into new territory as scouts, to see if the army should travel in that direction. If it was the correct way to go, the army proceeded into the territory reconnoitered by the advance guard.

French Utopian philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was probably the first to use the term avant-garde in relation to art. He did so in a book that presented an imaginary conversation between an artist, an industrialist and a scientist. At one point, the artist says, "Let us unite. To achieve our one [revolutionary] goal, a separate task will fall to each of us. We, the artists, will serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious. When we wish to spread ideas amongst men...we inscribe those ideas on marble or canvas, and it is there above all that our influence is most

electric and triumphant. We aim for the heart and imagination, and hence our effect is the most vivid and the most decisive...”¹³

Baudelaire & Modernism

French poet Charles Baudelaire used the term *avant-garde* to describe his ideal artist in his influential 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life.” Baudelaire described the artist as a man who was quintessentially modern, who strolled through the streets of Paris as a *flâneur*, appraising the fleeting, transitory images of the urban spectacle. Gazing at women and shops alike, he visually consumed them for his creative grist. Baudelaire stressed the heroic individualism of his artist-flâneur, and emphasized his quest for true “presentness.” Rejecting the materialism of middle class life, the artist embarked on a spiritual journey of self-discovery. For Baudelaire, modernity was a challenge to imagine and create the totally original. Such originality could only occur in art.

In contrast, the Academy valued technical proficiency in presenting perceived “reality.” As French sociologist Nathalie Heinich notes, the change from the Academic tradition to *avant-garde* Modernism “marks the passage from a system of values that favored ‘relative’ excellence (in that, like the superlative, its measure was comparison with its peers and the representatives of tradition), to a system favoring ‘absolute’ excellence, in that only negative comparison—distinctive and no longer imitative—with others is allowed...In the first case, emphasis is laid on technical competence, measured by the mastery of the canons. In the second, originality is affirmed in irreducibility to, or at least differentiation from, recognized models.”¹⁴

The general viewing public was used to Academic art and they often responded to *avant-garde* art with aversion. Seeing *avant-garde* transgressions of cultural codes as insults rather than innovations, they accused the new artists of fraud, vulgarity and lunacy. Starting with Courbet,

nineteenth century avant-garde artists were labeled cheats and madmen. Their exhibitions were called “chambers of horrors.”¹⁵

Although avant-garde artists move into territory not occupied--or understood--by the majority, their adversarial relationship with the dominant culture cannot last. If the artists’ innovative direction is valid, the culture eventually catches up with and incorporates the formerly challenging vision.

Popular music of the late twentieth century provides two good examples of the avant-garde process. In the late 1960s, when classical musicians first heard the Beatles, many said “That’s not music!” because the British rockers were working far outside the traditional domain of music. Today, the same classical musicians may be playing Beatles music in symphonic performances. Decades later, when Rap first emerged, many members of the rock generation said, “But that’s not even music!” Today, Rap has become a pervasive part of the sound environment. Rappers provide the soundtracks for everything from children’s television commercials to mainstream Hollywood romances. Although both the Beatles and the early Rappers were avant-garde, few listeners today would argue that either is “not music.”

Similarly, when we look at early avant-garde paintings, over a century after they first outraged the French public, we have trouble understanding how offensive they were. They simply are not avant-garde any more. These early artists “scouted” the new cultural territory and, eventually, society accepted and incorporated their artistic visions.

Edouard Manet as Avant-Garde Modernist

Despite the political and artistic integrity of Courbet in his early role as an avant-garde artist, his dependence on a traditional style of painting and conservative compositional formats compromised his protest against the mechanical coldness that threatened to cancel genuine

progress. If Academic paintings resemble Hollywood melodrama and sentimentality, Courbet's paintings resemble today's filmed documentaries. And just as many people today prefer escapist Hollywood entertainment to documentaries that reveal the underside of existence, the nineteenth century middle class rejected Courbet's portrayals of the unwelcome facts of their time in favor of Academic idealization and fantasy. Courbet's art carried a revolutionary social challenge in terms of content, but it was another artist who would challenge the Academic standards of style and composition: **Edouard Manet** (1832-1883, **6.9**).



6.9 Edouard Manet.

Manet painted unwelcome scenes of modern Paris, and he challenged the limitations of the Academic style of photographic realism. In doing so, he became one of the first authentically modern artists.

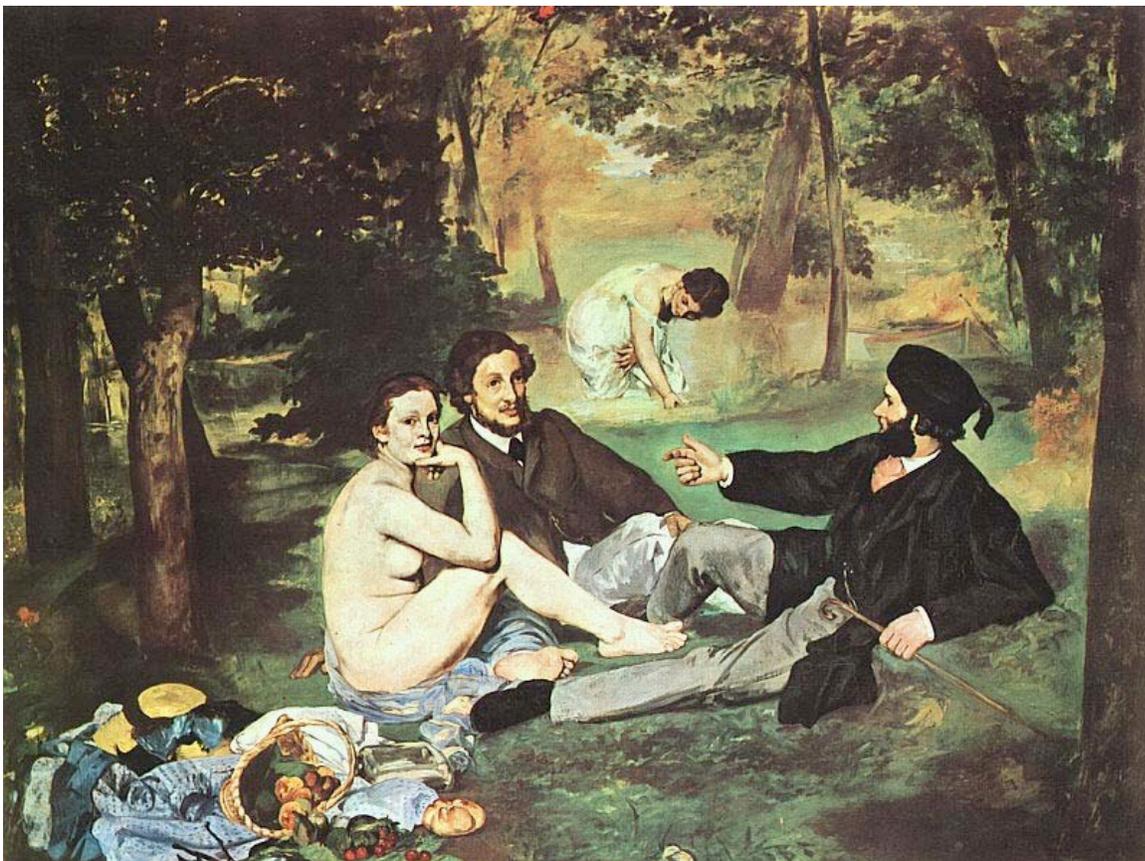
As the portrait of him by his young friend Henri Fantin-Latour clearly implies, Edouard Manet was not a likely candidate for the role of challenger of the status quo, either socially or artistically. Manet was a most reluctant rebel.

A social “insider” as much as he was an aesthetic outsider, he had an independent income and moved comfortably among the rich: Courbet relished the discomfort he caused the upper class. Manet kept his social passport valid in the upper class Paris as well as in bohemian Paris. In his studio, he dressed as impeccably as he did for his strolls and visits to the social world of the most fashionable cafes. When his art brought scorn from the Establishment, Manet—unlike the defiant Courbet—felt great personal pain. But in fact, it was just his desire to keep one foot in

the museums and the other in the modernity of the streets that enabled him to become the pivotal figure of the avant-garde.

The Salon of 1863: The Shock of the New

Manet painted scenes of modern Paris in order to close the gap between the stuffy traditionalism of Academic painting and the actual way of life of modern Parisians. He began to move away from perspective, initiating changes in the visual language that had ruled Western art since the Renaissance. The definitive avant-garde break with the dominance of Academic subject matter and idealized realism can be divided between two early Manet paintings: *Luncheon on the Grass* (6.10) and *Olympia*. Because it was such a radical break from the Academic standards, the new visual language of these two Manet paintings provoked fierce and almost universal scorn.



6.10 Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass*, 1863.

Manet did not intend to shock anyone when he submitted *Luncheon on the Grass* to the Salon of 1863. He had looked forward to the Salon with high hopes. Two years before, at the Salon of 1861, his *Spanish Guitar Player* (6.11), had earned him critical praise and an honorable mention. Inspired by his recent travels, the painting combined Spanish subject matter with a loose, painterly style influenced by Spanish masters like Velazquez and Goya.



6.11 Manet, *Spanish Guitar Player*, 1861.

Manet hoped to follow his early success with a painting that would be strikingly original--original enough to stand out in a crowd of almost a thousand accepted works. He also wanted it to be sufficiently rooted in tradition to appeal to Academic and middle-class taste.

Manet used a time-honored compositional strategy: he based his painting on a revered masterpiece, and updated it to contemporary context. Updated remakes were known as far back as the Renaissance: remember that Leonardo portrayed the *Last Supper* in a fifteenth century Italian palace, rather than a first century Jerusalem inn in which it actually occurred. The nineteenth century Academy loved updated remakes, just as Hollywood does today. (For example, the 1998 film *You've Got Mail* with Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks, updated the 1940 comedy *The Shop Around the Corner*--which was in turn based on the play *Parfumerie* by Miklos Laszio--by transforming the communication from letters to email.)

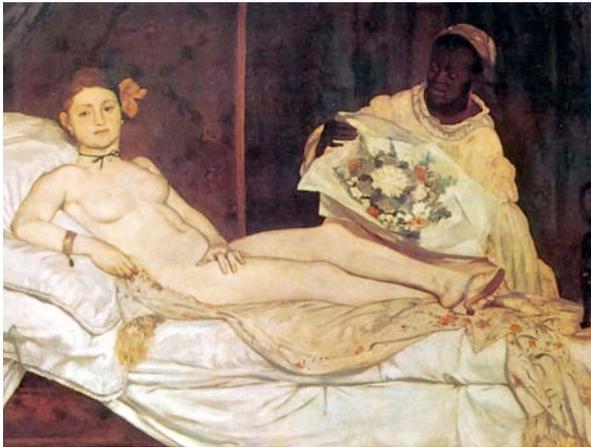
For *Luncheon on the Grass*, Manet positioned four contemporary figures picnicking in the woods so that they “quoted” the poses of four gods relaxing by a river in a famous Raphael painting (known to Manet through a print by Marcantonio Raimondi, **6.12.**)



6.12 Marcantonio Raimondi.

Luncheon on the Grass, however, was a complete fiasco. The official Salon of 1863 rejected it. It then became the derided and notorious centerpiece of the Salon of the Rejected (*Salon des Refuses*), an exhibit hastily put together by the government after a public outcry by artists, like Manet, whose work had been rejected by the official Salon. Over four thousand works were rejected by the jury in 1863.

The second painting, *Olympia*, although painted in 1863, was submitted and accepted in the official Salon of 1865 (6.13). Modeled after the *Venus of Urbino* by Renaissance master Titian (6.14), *Olympia* depicts a nude woman reclining on her bed. Unfortunately, for Manet, *Olympia* became the derided and notorious centerpiece of the official salon that year.



6.13 Manet, *Olympia*, 1865.



6.14 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538.

What caused such a remarkably hostile public reaction? Despite his drive for acceptance, Manet's works provoked an even more hostile response than Courbet's earlier socialist-inspired paintings of rural peasants and workers. The reasons for the strength of this public and critical reaction are very complex; the depth of the reactions indicate how difficult it was going to be for the nineteenth century public to relinquish its expectations of what art was supposed to portray and how paintings were supposed to look.

Manet's Artistic Offence: Severing the Connection with the Ideal World

One obvious reason for the public reaction to Manet's paintings was his seeming disregard of one of the essential qualities of Academic painting. Manet's paintings failed to present an ideal world as a goal for the present to imitate. The public did not want to see the present more clearly and vividly; they wanted to see the present reflected and softened by the rearview-mirror approach of Academic painting.

The four people in *Luncheon on the Grass* were obviously not borrowed from some idealized existence. They included, in fact, Manet's brother (Eugenie), his future brother-in-law, and his favorite model, Victorine Meurent (who was known to the Salon public from Manet's earlier paintings). The fact that the central woman was nude was not a problem for the Academy or for the Academy audience: they were used for many female nudes in public art exhibitions. What was a problem was that the woman was a known figure, portrayed as she actually appeared. She was neither elevated as a goddess nor exoticized as a harem girl. Nor was her body idealized according to the standards of beauty of the day. Seeing her portrayed in such a raw, realistic way was as shocking for the nineteenth century French public as seeing their own mother in a fold-out might be for today's Playboy magazine subscribers. Both violate the necessary distancing of objectification.

Manet's three people—real people—and the figure of the woman in the background were obviously enjoying themselves in present-day Paris. Manet's painting was a homage so entirely directed to the enjoyment of the present that the “ideal world” conjured up in Renaissance painting was destroyed even while it was being superficially imitated. So, despite Manet's brilliant orchestration of traditional themes prized by Academic painting—a nude, figures in a landscape, a still life—the public accurately perceived that these elements were not being treated as elements of an ideal world. The public therefore saw the mixture as merely ludicrous.

Manet's *Olympia*: An Unwelcome “Venus” for Modern Paris

Olympia fared no better before the public or the critics in the Salon of 1855.

The contemporary art critic Ernest Chesneau—who had purchased one of Manet's earlier paintings—wrote the following comments about *Olympia*:

“I must say that the grotesque aspect of his contributions has two causes: first, an almost childish

ignorance of the fundamentals of drawing, and then a prejudice in favor of inconceivable vulgarity---He succeeds in provoking almost scandalous laughter, which causes the Salon visitors to crowd around this ludicrous creature called ‘Olympia.’”¹⁶

Manet’s Artistic Revolution: A New Language of Artistic Form

Manet’s presentation of scenes of contemporary Paris would be enough to explain his rejection by the public. His difficulties, however, were magnified by Manet’s dramatic innovations in artistic form. These changes not only challenged traditional concepts of color and composition but decisively broke with the central formal structure of paintings since Brunelleschi himself: the perspective-based illusion of three-dimensional form. Manet’s changes, quite simply, made his paintings look flat.

Yet even this, like Manet’s choice of subject matter, had originated as a response to traditional painting. Just as Manet had naively hoped to combine the old and the new in subject matter, he had also hoped to uncover an entirely new way of using color. His teacher, the famous Academic painter Thomas Couture, taught the time-honored technique of carefully blending colors to create smooth transitions from light to dark. Manet changed this. Manet believed that “light appeared to the human eye with a unity such that a single tone was sufficient to render it...It was preferable, crude though it may seem, to pass suddenly from light to darkness rather than accumulate features the eye does not see and which not only weaken the force of light but accentuate the colouring of the shadows.”¹⁷

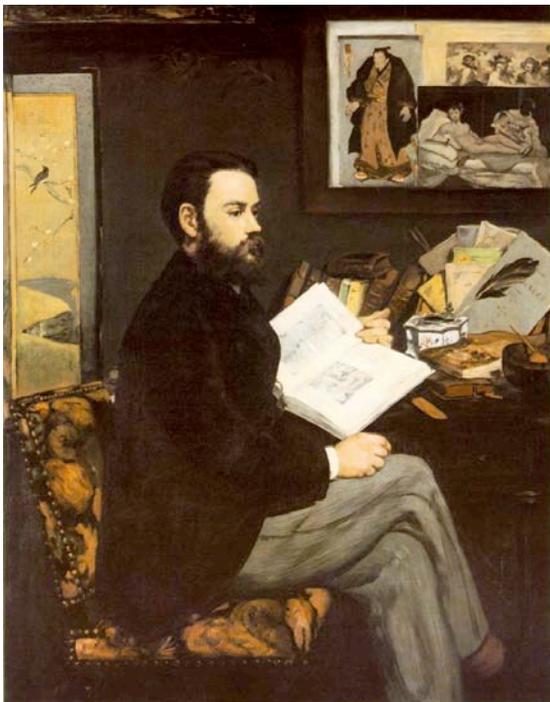
Manet, in short, justified his bold use of color contrasts as being more natural (and thus more scientific) than the seemingly photographic illusionism of Academic painting.

The bold areas of color also looked like the photographs of the day, which usually lit the subject from the front. This kind of lighting produced little of the dramatic dark and light values, or “chiaroscuro,” that had been popular in Western art since the time of Leonardo.

The curious look of Manet’s work resembled another aspect of photography also; his compositions had the “unedited” look of snapshots. This “snapshot” composition was an important aspect of Manet’s style. It conveyed the immediacy, the sense of the present, that Baudelaire had called for and Manet had sought.

Manet & Emile Zola: Words to Focus the New Visual Language of the Avant Garde

Manet suffered confused reactions to his paintings. He heard his paintings described by some as verging on pure abstraction, yet condemned by others as immoral.



6.15 Manet, *Emile Zola*, 1868.

One reason he had the courage to “stick to his guns” was the support he received from Emile Zola. His homage to the writer is seen in the large portrait of 1868 (6.15).

Manet’s 1868 portrait of Emile Zola represented his tribute and his thanks to Zola for his public support of Manet’s work. It was doubly appropriate that the painting showed a photograph of *Olympia* pinned on

the wall above Zola’s desk, together with a Japanese print. Even more significant is the small book on Zola’s desk entitled *Manet*—it contained Zola’s defense of Manet’s paintings.

These writings had originally appeared as newspaper articles. Just as newspapers had helped Manet's sense of modern times with their writing and imagery, so also—thanks to critics like Baudelaire and Zola—newspapers helped to inject the work of Manet and other avant-garde artists into the public forum.

Zola defended Manet with a brilliant description of the painter's new approach to subject matter and artistic form; his defense and clarification of Manet's peculiarly modern vision can be seen in his comments on *Olympia*.

Zola insisted on the presence of the personality of the artist as an integral part of the language of avant-garde art: "Each society will contribute its artists, who, in turn, will contribute their personalities...and our role, as judges of art works, is limited to ascertaining the language of the temperaments...[since] the whole personality of the artist consists in the way his vision is organized."¹⁸

Zola emphasized the value of the unique eye of the artist--the intelligent eye of the artist--in contrast to the totally objective but mechanical eye of the photograph, which was producing such limiting effects in Academic art.

Zola went on to discuss Manet's new use of the basic visual language of art--color, line, and shape--in his description of Manet's highly personal use of these elements in *Olympia*: "Olympia, reclining on the white sheets, is a large pale spot on the black background...details have disappeared. Look at the head of the young girl. The lips are two narrow pink lines, the eyes are reduced to a few black strokes. Now look closely at the bouquet. Some patches of pink, blue, and green. Everything is simplified and if you wish to reconstruct reality you must step back a bit. Then a curious thing happens. Each object falls into its proper plane. As accurate eye and a direct hand performed this miracle."¹⁹ Zola thus characterized Manet's artistic language as

creating a dynamic perceptual process that flows from abstraction (“pale spot on the black background”) to realism (“Each object falls into its proper plane.”)

Griselda Pollock on Manet’s *Olympia*

Zola’s formalist analysis of Manet’s *Olympia* ignores the content. The painting portrays a lower class woman represented as a prostitute. As art historian Griselda Pollock points out, Olympia’s location is not apparent to more recent viewers, but Manet’s contemporaries assumed the woman was a prostitute portrayed in a specific bordello. “[R]eference was made in the reviews to the cage Paul Niquet’s [bordello], the haunt of the women who serviced the porters of Les Halles [an area of Paris] and a sign for the reviewer of total degradation and depravity.”²⁰ Pollock suggests this confirms Manet’s re-inscription of the dehumanizing objectification of women described by Baudelaire.

In “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire positions woman as the object of the artist’s gaze: “Woman is for the artist in general...an object of keenest admiration and curiosity that the picture of life can offer to its contemplator. She is an idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching...No doubt woman is sometimes a light, a glance, an invitation to happiness, sometimes she is just a word.”²¹ Later in the essay, Baudelaire reveals the links women, class and prostitution. He describes the modern artist-flaneur’s journey across Paris, beginning in a theater filled with “fashionable society,” then passing by young, still attractive prostitutes (who are, of course, from the working class), and ending amongst “the poor slaves of the filthy strews,” whom Baudelaire calls “the perfect image or savagery that lurks in the heart of civilization.”²²

Not only did Zola fail to address the class and gender issues in Manet’s painting. He further failed to acknowledge the racial ones. Olympia is white; her servant is black. Manet

chose to repeat the conflation of race and power that had been coded into European cultural images and texts for centuries.

In short, *Olympia* is not a neutral or “natural” image. It reiterates culturally constructed inequities of race, gender and class. To see it as purely formal—as Zola appears to have done—is to see it with social blinders.

Impressionism: Avant-Garde Scenes of the Fleeting World

Manet’s paintings, despite the controversy surrounding them, consolidated the freedom to depict modern society that had been earlier initiated by artist like Courbet. Manet himself became a symbol of this new freedom. Throughout the 1860s a group of young artists rallied around his artistic standard. The Café Guerbois in the bohemian Montmartre section of Paris was their informal meeting place. Manet’s presence at these wide-ranging discussions helped to generate a sense of mutual support against a common enemy: the artistic “old guard” of the Academy.

This group of painters concentrated on artistic issues. The political and social dimension of Courbet’s approach to avant-garde art receded, temporarily, to a secondary position. Artistically, Manet had breached the barricade of perspective that even Courbet had honored. The young artists who followed him through the gap mapped out vast new territories of artistic structure and expression that are still being explored today.

In 1874 thirty of these artists assembled their work for a show at the studio of photographer Paul Nadar. The list of their names is a roll call of future greatness: Cezanne, Degas, Guillaumin, Monet, Morisot, Pissarro, Sisley. They called themselves, quite accurately, the “Independents.” The hostile press subsequently dubbed them “Impressionists.” The second name stuck.

Even though Impressionism has become one of the most amiable and universally appealing styles of art in Western history, the barb of derision meant by the original derogatory label for the group reveals the animosity of the initial public response. This animosity is evident in editorial cartoons of the time. One shows Impressionist paintings being used by the military—as weapons to terrify enemy soldiers.

Impressionism was the first avant-garde movement, in the sense of a group of artists who shared common goals and exhibited together outside the dominant cultural institutions. Most of the group concurred with Baudelaire's insistence that modernism was located in the fleeting and transitory moments of the urban spectacle. Inspired by the subjects and compositions of Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, the Impressionists portrayed everyday events involving everyday people. They eschewed the idealized realism of the Academy in favor of an optical realism derived from Manet. But unlike Manet, they often painted out of doors, looking directly at their subjects, and focused on the affects of light and color in various atmospheric conditions. The Impressionists exhibited together as a group from 1874 to 1886. Although there were many artist involved with Impressionism, we will look at the work of only a handful.

Cassatt, Renoir & Degas

Three Impressionists who focused on urban images were **Mary Cassatt** (1841-1919), **Auguste Renoir** (1834-1917), and **Edgar Degas** (1845-1926). Viewing their images in that order repeats the sequence of urban images Baudelaire's artist-flaneur observed in his mythic walk, from upper-class interiors to working class gatherings to "filthy stews."

Mary Cassatt's *Five O'Clock Tea* (1880, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, **6.16**) portrays two women of "fashionable society" having tea in a well-appointed living room. Cassatt, who

was herself of the wealthy bourgeoisie, creates a composition that draws viewers close into the intimate domestic space and suggests a relational interaction.



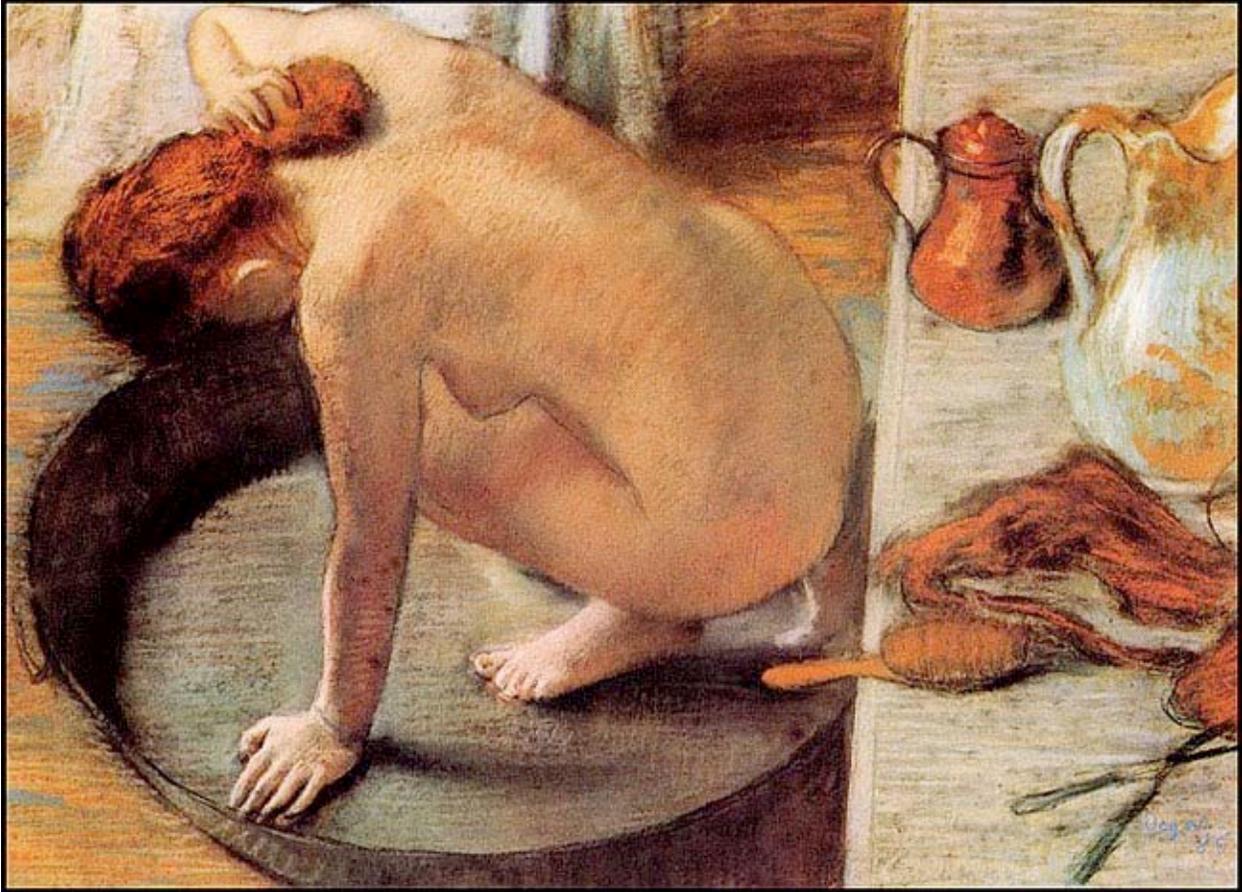
6.16 Mary Cassatt, *Five O'Clock Tea*, 1880.

August Renoir's *Moulin de la Galette* (1876, Orsay, **6.17**) turns a Sunday afternoon in Paris into "an ethereal fairyland in contemporary dress."²³ In the foreground, two lovely young women are gracefully posed together, to receive the gaze of a young male admirer. The (assumed male) viewer is encouraged to project into the young man's position and share his admiration for the two women on display. Renoir has portrayed his painter friends and a crowd of working class men and women at leisure. The illusion of carefree life conveys no sense of the very real class tensions in nineteenth century urban life.



6.17 August Renoir, *Moulin de la Galette*, 1876.

Edgar Degas created a large series of nude images of lower class women. His *The Tub* (1886, Orsay, **6.18**) portrays a nude woman of the lower class, crouched in a metal tub, bathing herself. She is seen from above; the viewer takes a superior or mastering position. The mastering position is more explicit in Degas' 1878-79 series of prostitutes. Degas' "grossly caricatured women of the brothel"²⁴ point to the representational distinctions between images of "respectable" women and those of the underclass. Cassatt's women of privilege are elegant and contained; Degas employs disturbing figural distortions to underscore prostitutes' social standing as monstrous transgressions of "proper" social norms.



6.18 Edgar Degas, *The Tub*, 1886.

Griselda Pollock calls our attention to the fact that many of the masterpieces of the modernist canon depict locations of working class entertainment and leisure, like bars and dance halls, as well as the bordellos and other haunts of prostitutes and the demimonde. Think of Manet's *Olympia*, Renoir's *Moulin de la Galette*, as well as Degas' brothel scenes. These were precisely the urban locales from which "respectable" women were banned. For a woman, even a woman artist, to enter such locales was to risk her very identity and sense of self. As we analyze the cultural context of avant-garde modernism, we should consider not only race, gender, and class, but also how these three social imperatives are interwoven with the spatial fabric of the city.

Claude Monet: From Urban Scenes to Color Perceptions

Claude Monet (1840-1926) broke with this family's wish for him to pursue a career in law, and in 1859 he left the coastal city of Le Harve to study art in Paris. In 1866 he became personally acquainted with Edouard Manet, after admiring his controversial work for several years. Though Monet learned much from Manet—and frequently depended on his financial help for survival—Monet gradually developed his own distinctive approach. Manet had given traditional themes like *Olympia* a sense of modernity and freshness. Monet left the museums entirely behind; he insisted on painting in the open air and finishing the painting “on the scene” instead of in the studio.

Manet himself was impressed by the results of the younger artist's open-air approach...But there were clear limits to Manet's approval of and admiration for Monet. Quite tactfully, Manet refused to show his own work in the first Impressionist exhibition of 1874. His Salon ambitions precluded too close an association with the highly diverse and struggling group of self-styled Independents.

The paintings that Monet showed at this time, however, clearly reveal both his debt to and his differences with Manet.

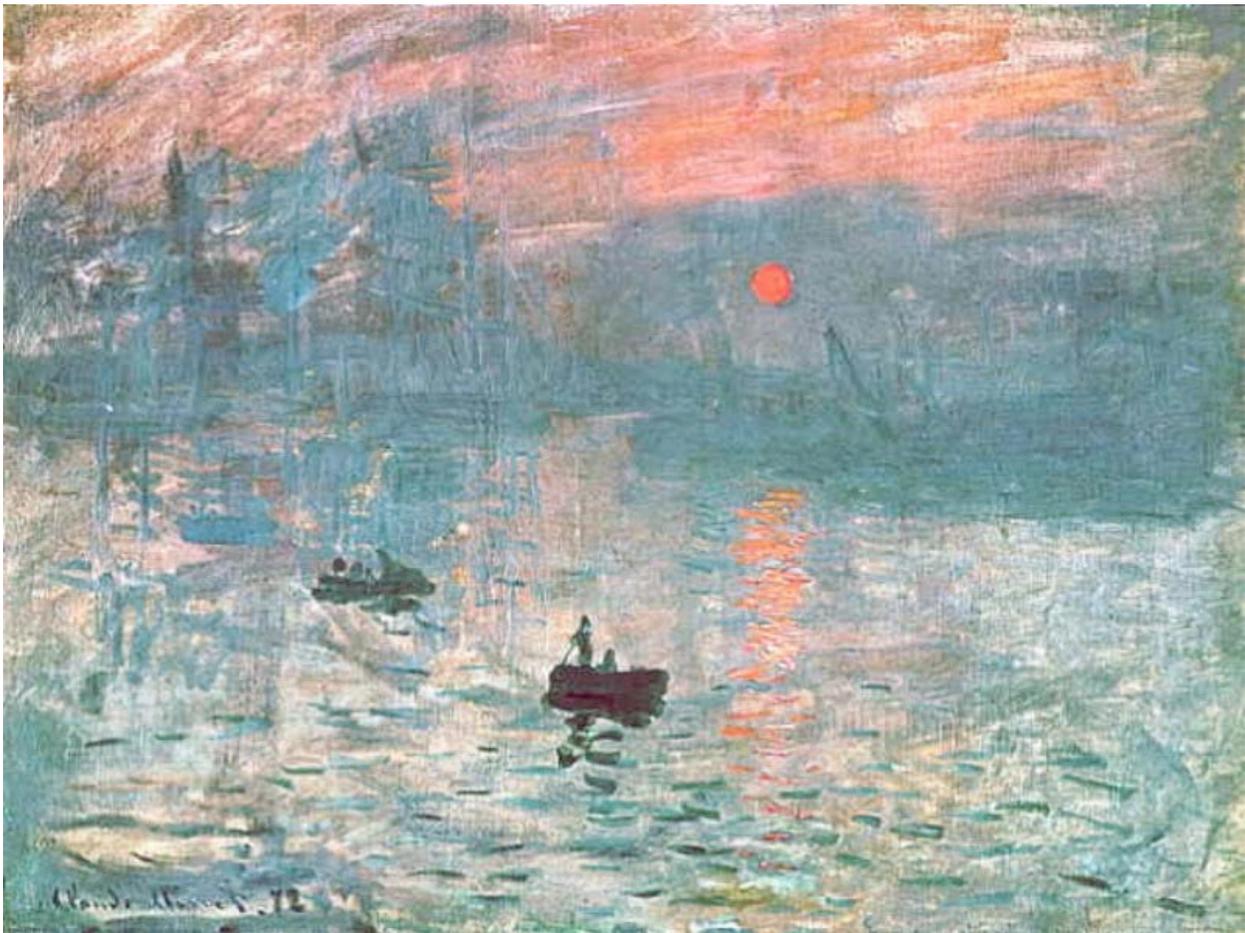
Monet's First Breakthrough: *Impression: Sunrise*

Monet's debt to Manet is seen most clearly in *Le Dejeuner*, painted in 1868 (6.19). This painting shows Monet's first wife, Camille, and his son in a comfortable, middle-class family setting. In terms of Monet's own life at the time, however, the painting was pure fantasy; his poverty was so severe that he had already once attempted suicide. His young wife later died from the lingering effects of malnutrition.



6.19 Monet, *Le Dejeuner*, 1868.

Le Dejeuner's clear colors and shapes mark it as a solid example of the kind of painting pioneered by Manet during the previous ten years. By itself, it would prove only that Monet was Manet's best student. Monet's uniqueness as an artist became apparent in another painting in the same exhibition: *Impression: Sunrise* (1872, **6.20**).



6.20 Monet, *Impression: Sunrise*, 1872.

Impression: Sunrise was painted in Le Havre during Monet's brief stay there on his return from London. He had gone to England to escape military service during the disastrous Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 that brought down the government of Napoleon III. This defeat led to the equally disastrous socialist takeover of Paris—the Commune—whose fall resulted in Courbet's exile by the new French government.

In artistic terms, this painting shows Monet taking a decisively different direction from Manet. To the critics and the public, the painting proved that Monet could not draw.

The critics tore into Monet with less venom but as much ridicule as they had used on Manet. One critic cautioned visitors to the exhibition to be careful because a gentleman who had visited the display earlier had suddenly gone mad and begun to bite the passersby! A less militant critic characterized Monet's canvases as wallpaper in embryonic form.

In *Impression: Sunrise*, however, everything dissolves into a single element: light. The boats, the sun, the fog itself, become mere transmitters of light. Imagine cutting out any small section of this painting—except perhaps the sun and the small boat in the foreground—and having to identify it without the rest of the painting. The critics, insofar as they accepted photographic realism as the only form of art, certainly had a point. There is a distinct suggestion here of “embryonic wallpaper.”

Yet Monet refused to budge. He even insisted that his paintings were more scientifically accurate than the photographic illusionism of Academic painting. Unlike such images, he insisted, his paintings were based on how the eye actually sees.

Monet's Impressionism: Painting as the Response of an Active Eye

Monet argued that the eye was active in its contact with nature—it did not see mechanically like a camera. Monet insisted that color, not the space of perspective and photography, was the basic content of human perception.

Since he saw nature, and therefore art, as a feast of color, Monet wanted, as he said, to see “innocently.” He wanted to see without imposing any preconceived artistic composition or hierarchy of importance onto the world of experience. The term he coined to describe this quality was *instantaneity*.

“Instantaneity” could be brought about only if art was directed toward recording what Monet called *objective sensations*, the raw data, so to speak, received by the eye from nature. The best way to understand Monet’s “objective sensations” and their relationship to his art is by examining his painting process itself.

While painting outdoors with the scene before him, Monet concentrated on the purely optical world. He applied his colors to the canvas in small, separate brush strokes that represented the discrete patches of color that his eye received from nature. The viewer’s eye would assemble these little dabs of color into a scene in a way similar to how the eye sees nature in ordinary vision.

Monet’s Laboratory of the Eye: Haystacks & Cathedrals

By the 1890s Monet had finally achieved financial and critical success with his paintings of the boulevards and suburban haunts of the middle class. People had begun to see their own environment with his vision.

Now, however, he had a dramatic change in his approach. He stopped painting familiar urban scenes—or any scenes with human figures. By this time, his eye did not just see, it analyzed as it saw. He began to concentrate on painting the sensation of perception itself.

Monet’s increasing emphasis on perception became apparent in a remarkable group of fifteen paintings exhibited in 1891, unusual not only because of their new attention to how the eye sees color, but because they all featured the same subject—haystacks.

Monet painted the haystack series in order to explore the changing conditions of light. A major source for the idea of a series was probably the *ukiyo-e* woodblocks of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), whose *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (6.21) were among the Japanese prints that had influenced Paris artists since the early work of Manet.



6.21 Hokusai, *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*.

After the haystacks, Monet produced forty paintings of the front –or façade– of Rouen Cathedral, which he painted in different lights ranging from that of moonlight to that of midday. To study the scene properly, he rented a room across the square from the church. In these paintings, Monet used thick strokes of paint on the canvas in colors that created the impression that the light itself was forming a kind of tactile screen.

Well-publicized scientific discoveries during this period had disclosed that the human retina is a kaleidoscope of interacting colors. In the human eye, color is not only relative; it is always changing. By focusing on the same subject through a whole series of paintings, Monet was able to concentrate on recording visual sensations themselves. The subjects did not change, but the visual sensations—due to changing conditions of light—changed constantly. The

haystacks and cathedrals enabled Monet to bring into attention ordinary visual sensations that, though usually unnoticed, are part of normal vision.

Other avant-garde artists besides Monet began at this time to radically depart from the traditional notion that color was part of the objects seen in nature. Monet began to derive color from perception; other artists began to base their use of color on feeling, symbolism, or some other source.

The new ways of using color can be explained with the color wheel, which arranges the colors of the spectrum in a circular band. Two terms that can be illustrated by the color chart came into common use by avant-garde artists at this time: complementary colors and analogous colors.

Complementary colors are any two colors that are opposite each other on the color wheel (e.g. red and green, violet and yellow). Analogous colors are any two colors that are next to each other on the color wheel (e.g., blue and blue-green, red-orange and orange). Warm colors are those that extend from red-violet to yellow-green and appear to visually advance towards the viewers. Cool colors extend from violet to green and appear to recede.

One effect of ordinary perception exploited by Monet that can be illustrated by the color wheel is called simultaneous contrast, the tendency to see in a given color fleeting traces of its complementary color. His *Rouen Cathedral, West Façade* (6.22) is built up from a flurry of brush strokes that interlace reds within greens, violets within yellows, and so on. In one sense, Monet did not paint the cathedral so much as he painted the action of the image of the cathedral on his own retina. The viewer thus sees the cathedral, not as it is in the world, but as it momentarily inhabited Monet's own eye. The many versions of the cathedral show that the

constantly varying paintings of the cathedral were not just a perceptual game for Monet, they dramatized an objective fact: to human perception, the cathedral was never the same.



6.22 Monet, various versions of the *Rouen Cathedral, West Façade*.

Another common visual effect he explored was the appearance of flatness that results when the viewer looks at an object lit from behind. The haystack paintings explore this effect with incredible complexity. Monet flattened out the haystacks that are lit from behind. His paintings also show the slight halo or radiance that occurs with this kind of light, as well as the tendency—seen in the front of some of the haystacks—for such lighting to cause the object to appear to merge with its own shadow. This insistence on color as the basic building block of human perception as well as art explains why there is no black in the shadows in Monet’s paintings. Since black is the total absence of light, all shadows have some color in them.

Monet’s attention to these scientifically documented effects was not a mechanical sort. Just as Vermeer adapted the “circles of confusion” produced by the camera obscura lens to his own artistic purposes, Monet turned the new knowledge of perception to the concerns of his own art. Since Monet was intuitively sensitive to the process of perception, it might be more precise to say that such current scientific information enabled him to justify his own spontaneous responses to critics of his approach.

Monet’s Water Lilies & Gardens: Seeing Nature from the Other Side of Perspective

One of the most astonishing aspects of Monet's career is how innovative and productive he was in his last years. The haystacks and cathedrals were only the halfway point in his uncovering of an artistic language tied directly to the objective processes of perception. Monet spent his last forty years on his estate at Giverny, forty miles outside Paris. Here he cultivated a network of pools and gardens that became almost the sole subject of his paintings.

At Giverny, Monet's paintings became larger—and then redoubled in size. The artist who began his career by taking his paintings outdoors to finish in one sitting ended by painting fields of vision. At the age of seventy-five he had to climb a ladder to reach the top of some of his canvases. His gardens and his canvases began to compete with each other in scale; in the final paintings at Giverny, the reach of Monet's perception closed the boundaries between nature and art. Monet's paintings

became environments that rivaled nature itself (6.23).

Monet found resources in Impressionism that carried him into an immensely creative old age. He died wealthy, acknowledged as a genius, in the company of the premier of France, Georges Clemenceau.



6.23 Monet, *Nymphéas*.

Post Impressionism: Artistic Search for Reality Beyond the Eye

As soon as Impressionists achieved public acceptance, a new generation of artists began to move in yet different directions. Although they were all of the same general age and although all built on advances forged by Impressionists, these artists worked in different styles and for different purposes. Of the many Post Impressionists, we'll focus on four.

Paul Cezanne: Creating an Architecture of Color

Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) was a childhood friend of Emile Zola and an informal but exhibiting member of the Impressionists in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s. By the late eighties, however, he had broken with Zola for using him as a model for the artist-hero of one of his novels. He also broke with the Impressionists, because, he said, their art lacked structure.

By 1886, when the Impressionists were having their first public success, the disgruntled Cezanne retired to the family estate near Aix-en-Provence, in the south of France. Supported by an inheritance, he led the life of a recluse. He also became a greater artist-hero than Zola could have imagined. Cezanne proceeded to take Impressionism apart and reconstruct it into a visual language that became an influential basis for the avant-garde art of the twentieth century.

The key to Cezanne's painting is color. The Impressionists had used color intuitively, like perception itself. Cezanne was not interested in the instantaneous flash of appearances. He was also not interested in an art with the predictability of technology. He said that he wanted "to make Impressionism something solid and durable, like the art of the museums."²⁵

Cezanne: Creating Light with the Density of Matter

Both Cezanne's link with Impressionism and his impending break to a new style are evident in his landscape of 1880, *Houses in Provence* (6.24).



6.24 Paul Cezanne, *Houses in Provence*, 1880.

At first glance, the landscape has the familiar brush strokes of Monet's work of the same period. A closer look reveals that Cezanne had already begun to discipline these strokes into nearly parallel layers of color that gave a strong sense of structural surface. Cezanne's painting looks more like a landscape hammered into a relief sculpture than an image based on the perception of light.

Cezanne's intuitive but highly structured transformation of Impressionism resulted from an increasingly effective use of color to create structure. This effect is fully realized in his 1895 painting *The Basket of Apples* (6.25). Cezanne affirmed the surface of the canvas and the visual

language used to create the image, rather than presenting the illusion of a window that opens onto a three-dimensional volume of space filled with real objects.



6.25 Cézanne, *The Basket of Apples*, 1895.

For Cézanne, color *was* perspective. He used warm colors to make forms appear close, cool colors to make forms recede. He shared Manet's observation that objects painted in flat by bright colors seem to achieve fullness of form without the subtleties of shading.

By using tiny slabs of color that simultaneously create both structure and space, Cézanne produced paintings that took on a solidity that defies the simplicity of their initial appearance. The apples, in fact, seem to have a density many times that of ordinary apples. This density even affects the light—Cézanne's painted forms do not seem to reflect light, they seem to absorb it.

Cezanne employed an equally willful geometry to hold *The Basket of Apples* together. The bottle leans slightly to the left. In order to balance the bottle, the two top pastries on the dish in the background lean up at an improbable angle and point to the right. The white tablecloth forms a secure, open triangle at the front of the canvas; this helps to counteract the edges of the table, which touch the edges of the canvas with otherwise inconsistent angles. Rather than reduce the objects to how they appear from a single fixed point of view, Cezanne used multiple perspectives.

Although avant-garde in 1880s and 1890s, by 1904 Cezanne was considered a master. He had retrospective in Paris that greatly influenced a young Spanish artist who had just come into town to enter the avant-garde world there: Pablo Picasso.

Paul Gauguin: The Quest for the “Primitive”

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), like Cezanne, owed much to Impressionism. He admired the work of Monet, but eventually scornfully dismissed it as inadequate. Gauguin’s scorn was not narrowly focused. He dismissed another of his contemporaries, Georges Seurat, as “that little green chemist.” In fact, Gauguin eventually dismissed almost everything: his family, career, and financial security.

Gauguin came from an affluent, middle-class background and spent many of his childhood years in Peru. As an adult, he traveled widely, including a visit to the tropical island of Martinique and a period as a laborer on the Panama Canal. With his background, he was able to establish a financial career on the Paris stock market that supported his family of six children quite comfortably. During his spare time, he painted with the Impressionists, and he was so talented that they allowed him—a stockbroker—to exhibit with them. His talents even met Academic standards: one of his paintings was accepted into the Salon of 1876.

By 1886, Gauguin had turned his back on all of this, abandoning Paris and its sophisticated urbanity in search of a “primitive” life that was closer to nature. Breaking away from Impressionism, his work and family, he moved to the town of Pont-Aven in rural Brittany. Here on the remote Atlantic coast, Gauguin and his group hoped to learn how to “paint like children.”

In this very religious and still pre-industrial region, Gauguin explored a style that included an emphasis on flat shapes, bold color, and heavy outlining. Gauguin also added an important new element: symbolism. Gauguin used symbolism to project ideas that originate, as he put it, in the “mysterious centers of thought.” In his 1889 self-portrait, Gauguin portrays himself, quite candidly, as a man divided within himself—symbolized by the apples, the halo, and the snake borrowed from the biblical story of the temptation of Adam and Eve. Equally candid is the large nose and the mischievous and arrogant expression of the eyes. The two flat shapes that make up the torso and the background are bright yellow and red, respectively; they give the image the feeling of a playing card, including the connotation of risk-taking and chance that was a central aspect of Gauguin’s character.

Gauguin’s *The Vision After the Sermon—Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1888, **6.26**) is a more complex example of Gauguin’s new approach to color, line, and symbolism. The colors were simplified to basic tones of red, blue, and white. Gauguin pictured a mental event as well as a physical event. Women in traditional peasant attire are shown as they listen to a sermon dealing with the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel—the events described in the sermon are pictured in the background. This painting shows the avant-garde acceptance of mental events as the subject of painting. It could be used to illustrate one of Gauguin’s personal mottoes: “I close my eyes in order to see better.”²⁶



6.26 Paul Gauguin, *The Vision After the Sermon—Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1888.

Gauguin in Tahiti: Creating the Avant-Garde Myth of the Noble Savage

Gauguin traveled to Tahiti in 1891 to continue his journey away from Western civilization. His experience in Tahiti transformed his art. Some of his early paintings suggest that Gauguin found the beauty and simplicity of life that he sought in his escape from Europe. His *By the Sea* (1892, **6.27**) shows two women about to swim in the ocean. A luxuriant tree moves rhythmically across the front of the painting. In the background a man fishes in the surf with a spear. Life seems transparently clear and simple.

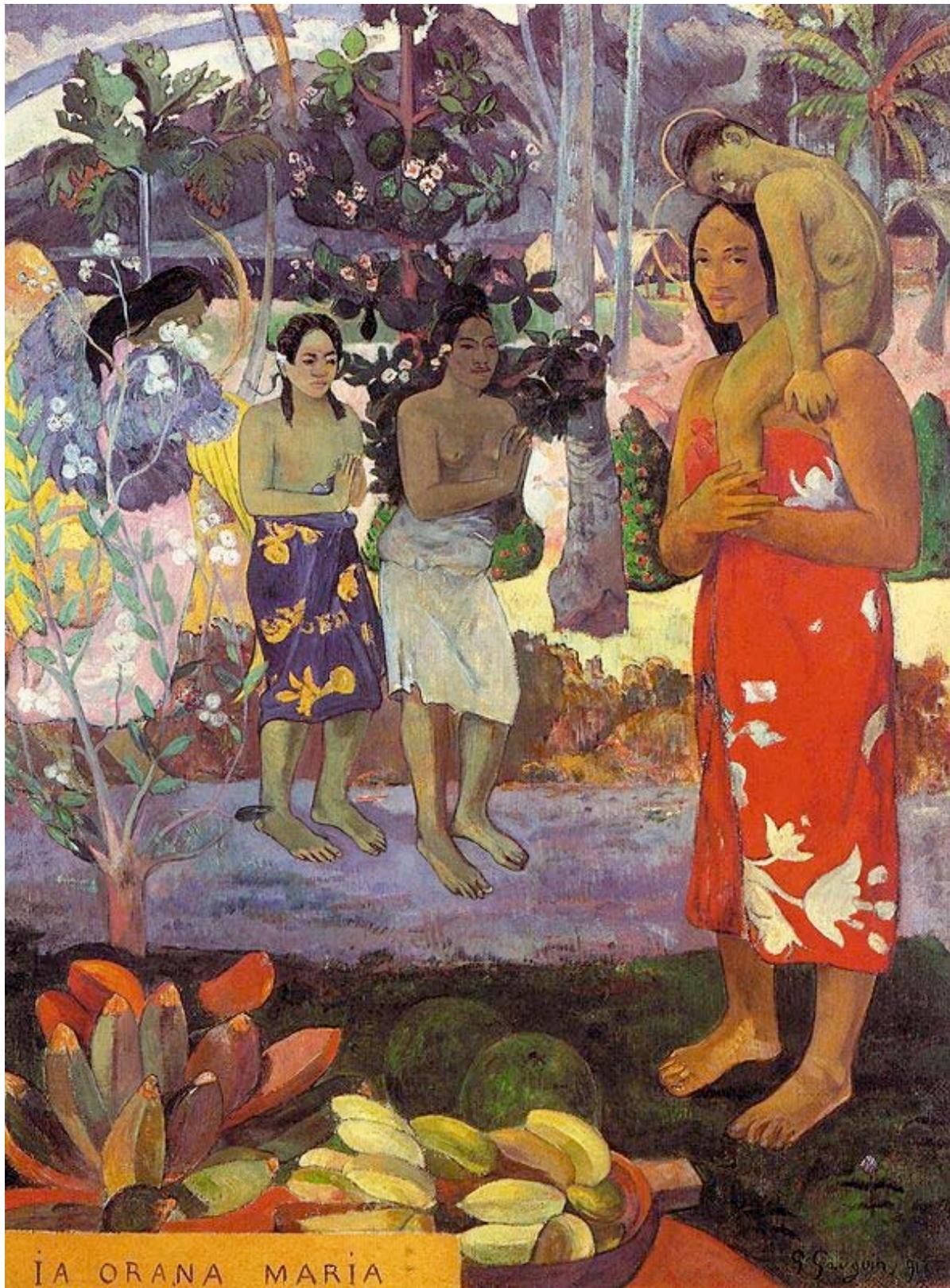
Other early paintings, however, involve the complex mixture of a symbol and direct observation seen in *After the Sermon*. Painted in muted earth colors and lush pastel tones, Gauguin's *La Orana Maria (We Greet Thee, Mary)* (1891, **6.28**) employs a simplified drawing

style to depict a world where epiphanies and the natural environment merge. An angel with white wings stirs behind the branches of the elegant bush in the foreground as two worshipful figures advance toward the Madonna and Child figures. The tapestry-like background with abundant fruit completes the sense of paradisaical harmony.



6.27 Gauguin, *By the Sea*, 1892.

The halos on the Madonna and child figures are an indication that Gauguin had not forgotten his Western roots. The painting's surface has the color and charm of a medieval painting from just before the Renaissance. What it lacks, of course, is belief. Gauguin was neither a Polynesian nor a Christian; he was a superbly sophisticated Parisian who painted his desire for faith and simplicity—much as Monet painted in order to reach an “innocence of seeing.”



6.28 Gauguin, *La Orana Maria (We Greet Thee, Mary)*, 1891.

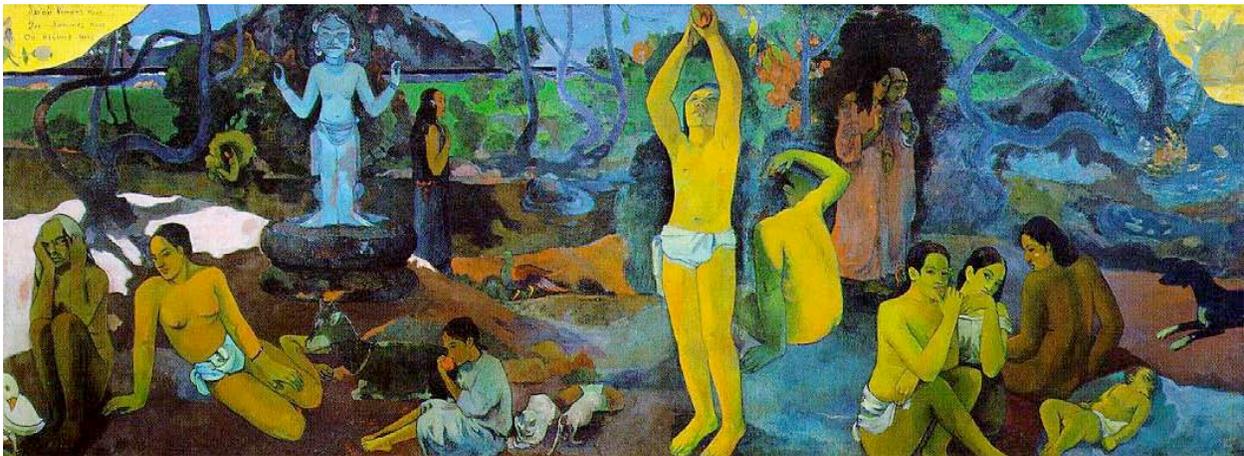
Paintings like this, however, fueled his reputation in Paris. When he returned for a visit in 1893 after two years in Tahiti, he was welcomed by the avant-garde as a kind of “primitive savant”: he had made the journey from civilization to nature and then returned. Gauguin indulged these expectations, reappearing in Paris with spears, idols, and artifacts from Polynesia. With his Javanese bride (from Montmartre) and a monkey he kept in town, he made the rounds of his old bohemian haunts, wearing a long blue frock coat and carrying a walking stick carved with “barbaric” figures. He established his claim to the title “Gauguin the savage.”

Gauguin: The Final Return to Paradise

By the end of 1893 Gauguin had again tired of Paris, so he arranged for an exhibition of his paintings in order to finance his return to Tahiti. Once back on the islands, his art took on a deeper connection with the myths and traditions of the people around him. He began to do mural-size works as well as easel paintings. Traditional easel paintings, which had originated during the Renaissance, were a private window for a single viewer to observe scale-model images of an objective world. Gauguin’s murals created a surrounding environment instead of the illusion of a window; they seemed to offer a way back toward community, ritual, and myth.

Gauguin believed that art could change the way the artist perceived reality and, in the process, change the artist’s self. For Gauguin, art had become a kind of religion, a link with mysterious and transformative energies. This attitude is especially clear in the huge painting *Where do we come from? Where are we? Where are we going?* (1897, **6.29**). Gauguin created this mural-size painting after learning of the death of his favorite daughter, Aline, in Denmark, and it reflects his mood of despair at the time. The colors of the natural background are suppressed to a cold, muted gray, even though the figures almost glow with a golden bronze. Gauguin left a lengthy description of the picture, noting that he put into it his “sufferings in

terrible circumstances.” He added, “An intentionally large figure, which defies perspective, sits with an arm upraised and looks in amazement at the two people who dare think about their destiny.”²⁷ Having catalogued his despair in these ritually posed forms set in his own mysteriously glowing color, Gauguin attempted suicide by taking arsenic.



6.29 Gauguin, *Where do we come from? Where are we? Where are we going?* 1897.

He was found, barely alive, by natives who brought him back to his house. After weeks of suffering, he recovered his health and began a final period of productivity before his death in 1903.

The impression created by Gauguin’s art (and personality) is summed up in the introduction to his 1893 Paris exhibition, written by the playwright August Strindberg. “Who is he then? He is Gauguin, the savage who hates a wearisome civilization; something of a Titan who, jealous of his Creator, in his idle moments makes his own little creation; a child who breaks up his toys to make others; he who denies and defies the rabble, preferring to see the sky red, rather than blue, as they do.”²⁸

Gauguin & the Myth of the Primitive

Art historian Abigail Solomo-Godeau argues that Gauguin’s life functions as the archetype for what she calls **primitivism**, the “white, Western and predominantly male quest” to

find in “primitive” cultures the “natural” Other to contemporary urban life.²⁹ Comparing primitivism to Orientalism, Solomon-Godeau points to “the dense interweave of racist and sexual fantasies and power—both colonial and patriarchal” underlying both.

Gauguin first sought the Other in Brittan in northwest France. He wrote, “I love Brittany: there I find the wild and the primitive. When my wooden shoes ring on this stony soil, I hear the muffled, dull, and mighty tone I am looking for in my painting.”³⁰

In the South Pacific, he found an even more satisfyingly “primitive” collusion of nature, femininity and spirituality. Now in his fifties, he had several adolescent lovers, who posed for him, acted as his informants, and cleaned his house. He wrote, “I saw plenty of calm-eyed women. I wanted them to be willing to be taken without a word, brutally. In a way [it was a] longing to rape.”³¹ The power inequities of older man/younger woman were multiplied by the inequities of colonizer/colonized because Gauguin lived on islands that were French possessions.

As distasteful as Gauguin’s primitivism may sound to a twenty-first century reader, it has been celebrated in numerous (highly romanticized) novels and films, most notably *Wolf at the Door* (1987, France/Denmark, Henning Carlsen), starring Donald Sutherland as the painter. A later film of Gauguin’s life starred his son Keifer Sutherland as the artist.

Gauguin can be seen as an antecedent to twentieth century hippies who “turned on, tuned in, and dropped out.” Just as Gauguin rejected European culture and turned to the native life of Tahiti, the 1960s hippies rejected the materialism of US life and espoused what they thought were Native American values. In doing so, the hippies were practicing a kind of “primitivism.” With little or no insight on Native American cultures, they appropriated what they wanted from romanticized stereotypes that reduced Native Americans to generic “closer to nature” Others.

Primitivism continues today. Cultural critic bell hooks has analyzed primitivist imagery in today's magazine ads, clothing catalogues and Hollywood films. In discussing primitivism in the form of Western men going native and/or colonizing the "primitive" Other's body, hooks relates a disturbing anecdote from her years of teaching at Yale. She was walking behind some athletic young men and overheard their conversation about having sex with women from different races and ethnicities. "Seemingly unaware of my presence...they 'ran' it down. Black girls were high on the list, Native American girls hard to find, Asian girls (all lumped into the same category), deemed easier to entice, were considered 'prime targets.'" hooks concludes, "To these young males and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other, as well as a way to make themselves over, to leave behind white 'innocence' and enter the world of 'experience'...The direct objective was not simply to sexually possess the Other; it was to be changed in some way by the encounter. 'Naturally,' the presence of the Other, the body of the Other, was seen as existing to serve the ends of white male desire."³² In other words, for these young men, having a sexual encounter with the Other while in college functioned like Gauguin's trips to Tahiti and the hippies' immersion in Native American life. The primitivist quest was satisfied.

Henri Rousseau: Experiencing Innocence & Wilderness in Paris

Gauguin contributed to the subjective dimension of the avant-garde art tradition by freeing color and symbolism from the constraints of the optical world. **Henri Rousseau** (1844-1910) accomplished a similar feat without disrupting his ordinary pattern of life in urban Paris.

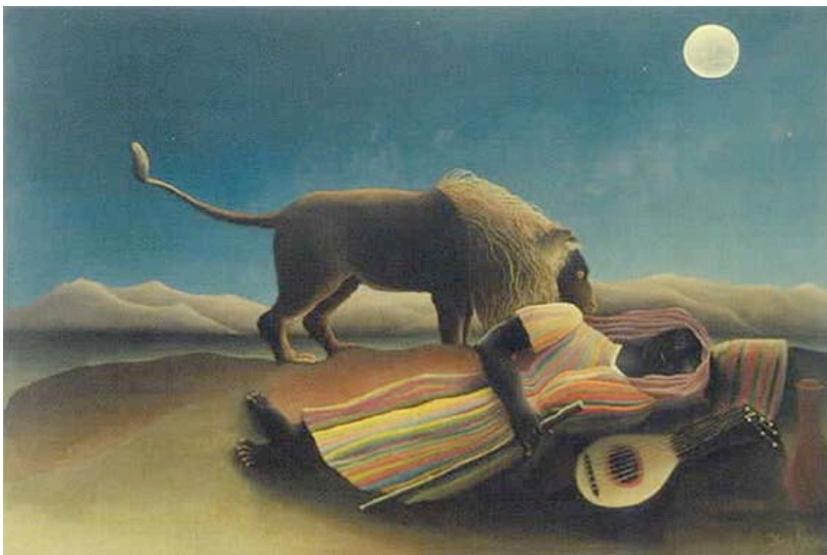
Rousseau worked for twenty years as a soldier and a tax collector (thus his nickname *Douanier*, "tax collector"). At the age of forty-two he took an early pension and devoted the rest of his life to art. Rousseau's art reveals a kind of innocence that is much like that sought in

different ways by Monet and Gauguin. His was the interior innocence buried in each individual as a residue of the childhood.

Rousseau's own baffling innocence permeated his life. He once commented that he would not work to pay for a bigger apartment than his one-room dwelling, because the first thing he saw when he awoke each day was one of his paintings—and what could be better than that?

His innocence extended to his painting technique. Rousseau aimed for the technical perfection that he saw and admired in the work of the famous Academic painters of the day; he devoted himself, in John Canaday's words, to an "extreme carefulness of outline, smoothing out of the paint, a finicky blending of one tone into another, and a fascination with fine detail"³³

This technique was similar to that of one of his favorite painters, Jean Leon Gerome; one of Gerome's paintings served as inspiration for Rousseau's marvelous *The Sleeping Gypsy* (1897, **6.30**). This painting has the luminous clarity of a dream. Its remarkable innocence, unmitigated by any theory or explanation, presents the shoulder of the gypsy, the mandolin, and the vase from three different viewpoints.



6.30 Henri Rousseau, *The Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897.

The only art Rousseau's painting resembles at all is child art. But his child art vision has the richness of fully adult experience of the world of modern Paris. Later, twentieth century developments like Freudian psychology, Cubism, and Surrealism, would make his paintings look like prophecies.

Rousseau's Jungle Paintings: Finding the Wilderness Within

Rousseau's finest paintings are those culled from his visits to the botanical gardens in Paris and from postcards and photographs of tropical places he visited in his imagination.



6.31 Rousseau, *The Dream*, 1910.

His last major painting, *The Dream* (1910, **6.31**), is a kind of summation of the energies he poured into these works. This figure-landscape composition rivals the visionary myths of Gauguin. Pressed against the canvas is a forest of subtle green color and forms—like a mirthfully restored Eden. Two astonished lions and a partly hidden rhino gaze out from their habitat. Each

plant seems to line up horizontally in an effort to achieve maximum recognition within the lush, horizontally layered apparition. A dreamy, sensuous nude on a burgundy couch gazes at an ebony, Egyptianesque flute player. With the white central figure being entertained by the black-skinned musician, Rousseau's *Dream*--like Manet's *Olympia*--reinscribes racial inequities of the day.

It is a painting whose seemingly effortless fecundity realizes the dream of art so agonizingly fabricated by Gauguin: "Art is an abstraction. Extract from your dreams about nature and think more of the creation than of the result. The only way to approach God is to do as our Divine Master did, to create."³⁴

Rousseau showed that the effort of the subjective direction of the European avant-garde was not to reject civilization but to reclaim its source within the human person. Of all the artists of the nineteenth century, Rousseau affirms perhaps the most complete vision of the myth of the autonomous individual. His dreamlike works celebrate the importance of the inner event and the inner landscape. Rousseau took the journey of subjectivity without leaving home.

Vincent van Gogh: Avant Garde as Self-revelation

Vincent van Gogh's life (1853-1890), one of the most remarkable in the history of Western art, has since become a legend because of its persistent difficulties and tragic ending. He began his artistic career in 1880 at the age of twenty-seven. By the time of his death ten years later, he had opened up Post-Impressionist art to a radically new level of subjective expression of feeling.

Van Gogh's brief career had three distinct periods, each of which evolved in a different location: Holland (1880-1886), Paris (1886-1888), and Arles, in the south of France (1888-90).

Even though the paintings from the last period are his most influential works, the other periods are equally important in terms of his life and his artistic accomplishment.

Van Gogh's Apprenticeship (1880-86): Student of Life & Student of Art

By the time van Gogh turned to art, he had been fired from a promising sales career in an international art gallery based in The Hague. He had also lost his job as religious missionary in a poverty-stricken industrial town in Belgium. These failures were due, at least partly, to his deep but impulsive idealism and the equally strong intensity of his personality.



6.32 Vincent van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, 1885.

The Potato Eaters (1885, **6.32**) is a good example of his characteristic sincerity. This painting was completed five years after van Gogh, with his usual fervor, decided to embark upon a career as a self-educated artist. The crude, almost cartoon-like quality of the painting makes

Courbet seem like a perfumed and polished Academic. The painting nevertheless shows van Gogh's biblical concern for the poor, as well as his disdain for courting easy success by pleasing public taste. The concern and vulnerability of the painting overcome its aesthetic limitations.

“I have tried to make it clear how these people, eating their potatoes under the lamplight, have dug the earth with the very hands which they put into the dish.”³⁵

Van Gogh's art was always focused on his need to communicate personal feelings about reality with the same passionate conviction clearly visible in *The Potato Eaters*.

In 1886, after reaching a point at which he was satisfied with his progress, he accepted his brother Theo's invitation to come to Paris. Theo had made a successful career for himself as an art dealer there and had been helping his brother financially since his decision to become an artist. Theo had urged Vincent to come to Paris and see the artistic revolution then under way by the Impressionists.

Van Gogh in Paris (1886-88): The Discovery & Rejection of Impressionism

During his stay in Paris van Gogh received a rapid education in the theories and practices that had been accumulating in avant-garde art since Courbet. Since the technology for printing photographs of paintings in magazines and newspapers did not arrive until the turn of the century, avant-garde art had made little impact outside of Paris.

His 1886-87 self-portrait reflects his enthusiasm for the new brightness of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. The background is made up of colored dots; the brush strokes of the face are direct and forceful. This portrait, with its deliberate attempt at urbanity, clearly reveals van Gogh's characteristic intensity and the subtle shadow of paranoia that so often rose to the surface. The portrait also shows why the artist who painted *The Potato Eaters* could not be contained indefinitely within the moderation of Impressionism or any other fixed visual system.

Also while in Paris, Van Gogh was exposed to the art of Japanese woodblock prints. He copied several prints into paintings to learn about their use of space and color. He later wrote to Theo, “All of my work is in a way founded on Japanese art, and we do not know enough about Japanese prints.”³⁶

By 1888, van Gogh had absorbed all the theory and done all the experimenting he needed to bring himself to the threshold of his own artistic breakthrough. With his brother Theo’s continuing help, he left for the south of France to begin the final phase of his artistic pilgrimage.

Van Gogh in Arles (1888-90): The Beginning & the End

Even though he was there for only a little over a year, van Gogh’s art bloomed in Arles. The sunlight there had an intensity that matched his own, yet Arles refreshed him. Its Roman ruins and its Mediterranean tolerance were a welcome escape from the combative and hurried pace of Paris. While there, van Gogh worked constantly. He drove himself like a man who heard a clock ticking away his opportunity. The results were prodigious: he produced over two hundred paintings in two years.



6.33 van Gogh, *The Bedroom at Arles*, 1888.

The Bedroom at Arles (1888, **6.33**) is a remarkable example of the style he evolved to answer the need for an art that expressed feelings. The breakthrough for him was his decision to use color as a completely subjective device. He wrote to his brother that he agreed with Impressionist artist, Camille Pissarro, that color and line

must be exaggerated, or a picture is no better than a photograph.

Van Gogh in this painting used color to express and magnify his feelings, and he employed the outlined shapes and flat colors of Japanese prints. He used the same terminology for color as Monet and Cezanne; this painting, however, is a singularly new thing in art, a work that uses all these sources to make a statement about subjective feeling: “Well, I enormously enjoyed doing this interior of nothing at all...the walls pale lilac, the ground a faded broken red, the chairs and bed chrome yellow, the pillows and the sheet a very pale green-citron, the counterpane blood red, the washstand orange, the washbasin blue, the window green. By means of all these very diverse tones I have wanted to express an *absolute restfulness*, you see, and there is no white in it at all except the little note produced by the mirror with its black frame (in order to get the fourth pair of complementaries into it.)”³⁷

In order to appreciate van Gogh’s radical subjectivity, imagine what a photograph of the kind of room that would fit his budget would look like. The painting is a statement of van Gogh’s power to hope. He shows the viewer the room as he felt when he was in it after a day of laboring at his art. He communicated what the room *meant* to him, not what it looked like.

Van Gogh was elated about his artistic breakthrough. Even though his brother had yet to sell a single one of his paintings—he eventually would sell one before Vincent died—Vincent was convinced that his approach would eventually meet with the same public approval as Impressionism was then beginning to evoke. With typical enthusiasm, he invited a fellow artist he had met in Paris, Paul Gauguin, to come to Arles. Van Gogh’s plan was simple: since they had similar ideas, they would not only share expenses and lodging, but would make progress in their art. Their personalities, however, clashed so severely that van Gogh—already overworked and probably undernourished—broke down and a seizure in December of 1888.

When he woke up in jail on the day after his seizure he was shocked to learn that he had cut off part of his ear and given it to a prostitute (6.34). He also learned that Gauguin had left Arles, but van Gogh desperately resolved to continue on his own.



6.34 van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, 1888.

His life for the next eighteen months became a tragedy. In May of 1889 he voluntarily confined himself in a mental hospital at St. Remy, not far from Arles. During his stay there he alternated between hope for a full recovery and despair at his recurring periods of illness. He nevertheless continued to paint through the entire cycle.

Ironically, before he began to have seizures, his art had evolved to the point that his brush strokes became the direct expression of his feelings. He wrote that when he was absorbed in painting, “the emotions are sometimes so strong that one works without being aware of working...and the strokes come with a sequence and coherence like words in a speech or a letter.”³⁸



6.35 van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889.

Starry Night (1889, **6.35**), painted during one of his lucid intervals, is an eruption of ecstatic feeling. The universe is alive. Yellow stars wheel through a purple-blue sky. The dark branches of a cypress tree curve heavenward. The town, a cluster of carefully outlined and solid houses, is dominated by the spire of a church. It was van Gogh's dream from his stay in the Belgian coalmine village to the rented rooms in Arles, to settle into a world like this, a world that offered, not only security, but epiphanies. For van Gogh, of course, it was only a dream. The wheeling stars themselves show the swirling lines of a mind that was struggling to find, with an increasing sense of despair, an island of stability.

Starry Night was painted during his stay at St. Remy. Since he had made no significant improvement at St. Remy after several months, he left and went north, to the town of Auvers to place himself under the care of Dr. Paul Gachet, who was a friend of Cezanne and other avant-garde artists. His efforts there also failed to halt his worsening condition, caused by a still undetermined neurological disease. In despair of never fully recovering, van Gogh shot himself in July of 1890.

In one of his letters to his brother, he had written, "at moments, when I am in a good mood, I think that what is alive in art, and eternally alive, is in the first place the painter and in the second place the picture."³⁹

In another letter to Theo, he summed up his experience of life: "There may be a great fire in one's soul and no one ever comes to warm himself at it, and the passersby see only a little bit of smoke coming through the chimney and pass on their way."⁴⁰

Ironically, others had begun to see the fire in his paintings. Only a year after his death, a show of his paintings in Paris prompted the following comment in a review by the influential art critic Octave Mirbeau: "It is not possible to forget his personality, whether it be directed toward

some scene from reality or toward some internal vision. It overflows his being, giving intense illumination to all that he sees, touches, and feels...he has absorbed nature into himself.”⁴¹

This was van Gogh’s achievement. He created an art that fused color and form with the feeling arising from his own experience of reality. But van Gogh is not only remembered for his art. He is also remembered for the tragic nature of his life, which has achieved legendary proportions.

Myth of the Artist I: The Legend of Van Gogh

Since ancient times the artist has been mythologized as an extraordinary man capable of miraculous feats. German scholars Ernst Kris and Otto Kunz note that “from the moment when the artist made his appearance in historical records, certain stereotyped notions were linked with his work and his person—preconceptions that still influence our view of what an artist is.”⁴²

Kris and Kunz discuss two artist anecdotes that recur so often they can be considered “fixed biographical themes.” The first is the presentation of the artist as a child prodigy whose remarkable skills are recognized by a connoisseur who then facilitates the artist’s training. The best known of these accounts is found in Vasari’s discussion of the early Renaissance master Giotto who is said to have been working as a shepherd boy when his drawings were recognized as genius. A similar story was later told about Michelangelo. Kris and Kunz trace the roots of such tales back to Greek times.

The second fixed theme identified by Kris and Kunz is the artist’s capacity to create images so life-like that they fool animals and humans alike. The Greek historian Pliny the Younger recounted the tale of the artist Zeuxis who painted grapes so realistically that sparrows tried to eat them. His rival Parrhasios invited Zeuxis to his studio and asked him to pull back the curtain covering a painting. When Zeuxis tried, but realized the curtain was painted, he was

forced to acknowledge Parrhasios's superior skills. Similar stories recur in artists' biographies through the Renaissance and Baroque periods. One writer attested that a dog mistook a Durer portrait for his master. Raphael's portrait of Pope Leo X, Titian's portrait of Charles V of Spain, and one of Rembrandt's self-portraits were all reported as deceptively real. Kris and Kunz trace all of these accounts back to the Greek myth of Daedalus, whose statue of Hercules was so lifelike that the hero himself attacked it.

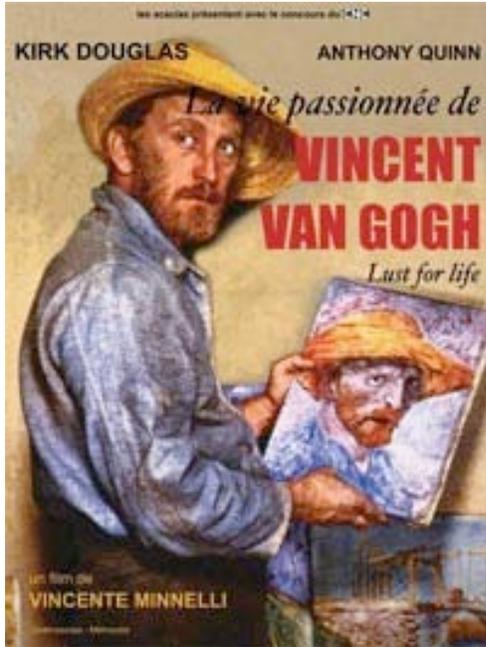
In the modern era, after the avant-garde rejection of technical proficiency and visual verisimilitude as absolute qualifiers for art, new mythic themes began to appear in biographical accounts of the artist. Many of them have to do with the artist's emotional, spiritual and/or sexual intensity. Others construct the artist as alienated and misunderstood.

The modern myth of the artist crystallized around van Gogh. Nathalie Heinich argues that a series of anecdotes (some of them fictionalized) coalesced to form the van Gogh legend: his being "called" to his art (as a preacher may be "called" to the ministry); his exceptional status as a genius; his isolation and unfitness for social or practical life; his detachment from early goods; his spiritual elevation; his incomprehension by his contemporaries; his martyrdom; and his final fulfillment in posterity.

Heinich notes that the mythic conflation of the artist's life with his work occurred soon after van Gogh's death by suicide. As early as 1901, the themes that constitute the myth were established in the reviews, which discussed van Gogh's "fatal anxiousness," his "passionate and exciting life," his "vocation to be an artist," his "strange, anxious and strong personality," and his "painful and tragic death." Within a few years, both critics and the public considered van Gogh "mad" and his work "the ultimate example of [his] authenticity"⁴³

Van Gogh's work—easily recognizable to the public because it is so distinct from other painters'—became the archetype of Modernist originality. The van Gogh myth served to support the Modernist belief that art is about personal self-expression, a belief that continues to dominate popular perceptions of the visual arts.

More films have been made about van Gogh than any other artist. Vincente Minnelli's



6.36 Vincente Minnelli, *Lust for Life*, 1956.

Lust for Life (1956, US, 6.36) was based on a best-selling novel by the same name. It starred Kirk Douglas as van Gogh and Anthony Quinn as Gauguin. Robert Altman's *Vincent & Theo* (1990, US) focused on the relationship between the two brothers, with Tim Roth portraying van Gogh as a tortured genius and Paul Rhys as the tragic Theo. There have also been several foreign language films that dealt with van Gogh, including most notably Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990, Japan).

Throughout the modern era, artists were portrayed as tragically alienated and misunderstood geniuses. Many of these mythic portrayals are found in what has been described as the dominant art form of the twentieth century: film.

¹ Leo Rosenthal, quoted in Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, "The Unhappy Medium," *The New York Review of Books*, May 1982, 50.

² Said in Lodge and Wood 271.

³ Said 273.

⁴ Said 275.

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- ⁵ H. W. Janson, *History of Art*, 4th ed., revised and expanded by Anthony F. Janson (New York & Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Harry N. Abrams & Prentice Hall, 1991) 635.
- ⁶ Marilynn Lincoln Board, “Myths and Ideologies in Matisse’s Odalisques” Broude and Garrard 363.
- ⁷ Berger 64.
- ⁸ Carol Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mommas” Broude and Garrard 349.
- ⁹ Clark, *The Nude* 159.
- ¹⁰ Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971) 112.
- ¹¹ Gustave Courbet, quoted in de la Croix and Tansey 758.
- ¹² Pierre Proudhon, quoted in *Realism and Tradition in Art*, ed. Linda Nochlin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 52.
- ¹³ Excerpted in Steve Edwards, ed. *Art and Its Histories, A Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 190.
- ¹⁴ Nathalie Heinich, *The Glory of Van Gogh, An Anthropology of Admiration*, trans. Paul Leduc Browne (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 10.
- ¹⁵ Heinich 16.
- ¹⁶ Ernest Chesneau, quoted in Nochlin, *Realism and Tradition in Art* 82.
- ¹⁷ Edouard Manet, quoted in Ian Dunlop, *The Shock of the New* (New York: American Heritage Press, McGraw Hill, 1972) 33.
- ¹⁸ Emile Zola, quoted in Nochlin, *Realism and Tradition in Art* 77.
- ¹⁹ Nochlin, *Realism and Tradition in Art* 72.
- ²⁰ Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity” Broude and Garrard 256.
- ²¹ Pollock 255.
- ²² Quoted in Pollock 255.
- ²³ Janson 32.
- ²⁴ Norma Broude, “Edgar Degas and French Feminism” Broude and Garrard 287.
- ²⁵ Paul Cezanne, quoted in Ariane Ruskin, *Nineteenth Century Art* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1973) 186.
- ²⁶ Paul Gauguin, quoted in John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978) 172.
- ²⁷ Paul Gauguin, quoted in Raymond Charmond. *Gauguin*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965, p. 78.
- ²⁸ August Strindberg, quoted in George Boudaille, *Gauguin* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1964) 209.
- ²⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Going Native, Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism” Broude and Garrard 313.
- ³⁰ Solomon-Godeau 315.
- ³¹ Solomon-Godeau 324.
- ³² bell hooks, “Eating the Other, Desire and Resistance” *Black Looks, Race and Representation* (Boston, South End Press, 1992) 23-4.
- ³³ Paul Gauguin, quoted in Charmond 15.
- ³⁴ John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1981) 390.
- ³⁵ Vincent van Gogh, *Dear Theo*, ed. Irving Stone (New York: New American Library, 1969) 290..

³⁶ Van Gogh, *Dear Theo* 290.

³⁷ Vincent van Gogh, quoted in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Hershel Chipp. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 42.

³⁸ Van Gogh, *Dear Theo* 391.

³⁹ Van Gogh, *Dear Theo* 324.

⁴⁰ Vincent van Gogh, quoted in Ruskin 193.

⁴¹ Octave Mirbeau, quoted in Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov. *Van Gogh in Perspective*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974) 78..

⁴² Ernst Kris & Otto Kunz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist, A Historical Experiment* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1979) 4.

⁴³ Heinich 27-8, 20.