Édouard Manet
By: The Art Story Foundation

SYNOPSIS

Édouard Manet was the most important and influential artist to have heeded poet Charles Baudelaire’s call to artists to become painters of modern life. Manet had an upper-class upbringing, but also led a bohemian life, and was driven to scandalize the French Salon public with his disregard for academic conventions and his strikingly modern images of urban life. He has long been associated with the Impressionists; he was certainly an important influence on them and he learned much from them himself. However, in recent years critics have acknowledged that he also learned from the Realism and Naturalism of his French contemporaries, and even from seventeenth century Spanish painting. This twin interest in Old Masters and contemporary Realism gave him the crucial foundation for his revolutionary approach.

KEY IDEAS

- Manet's modernity lies above all in his eagerness to update older genres of painting by injecting new content or by altering the conventional elements. He did
so with an acute sensitivity to historical tradition and contemporary reality. This was also undoubtedly the root cause of many of the scandals he provoked.

- He is credited with popularizing the technique of *alla prima* painting. Rather than build up colors in layers, Manet would immediately lay down the hue that most closely matched the final effect he sought. The approach came to be used widely by the Impressionists, who found it perfectly suited to the pressures of capturing effects of light and atmosphere whilst painting outdoors.

- His loose handling of paint, and his schematic rendering of volumes, led to areas of "flatness" in his pictures. In the artist's day, this flatness may have suggested popular posters or the artifice of painting - as opposed to its realism. Today, critics see this quality as the first example of "flatness" in modern art.

**EDOUARD MANET BIOGRAPHY**

*Childhood*

Édouard Manet was born into an upper-middle class Parisian family. His father, August, was a dedicated, high-ranking civil servant and his mother, Eugenie, was the daughter of a diplomat. Along with his two younger brothers, Manet grew up in a bourgeois environment, both socially conservative and financially comfortable. A mediocre student at best, he enrolled at thirteen in a drawing class at The Rollin School.

Manet had a passion for art from an early age, but agreed to go to the Naval Academy to appease his father. When he failed the entrance exam, he joined the Merchant Marine to gain experience as a student pilot and voyaged to Rio de Janeiro in 1849. He returned to France the following year with a portfolio of drawings and paintings from his journey, and used it to prove his talent and passion to his father, who was skeptical of Manet's ambitions.

*Early Training*

In 1849, Manet fell in love with his piano teacher, Suzanne Leenhoff. This affair resulted in a boy, Leon (b. 1852), who was passed off to Suzanne's family and, to avoid scandal, was introduced to society as Suzanne's younger brother and Manet's godson. The following year, Manet traveled to Italy, both for the art and for social distraction.
Reluctantly, his father allowed Manet to pursue his artistic goals. In January 1850, true to his contrary nature, instead of going to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts to learn what he considered outdated modes, Manet joined Thomas Couture's studio. While Couture was an academic painter, and a product of the Salon system, he encouraged his students to explore their own artistic expression, rather than directly adhere to the aesthetic demands of the days.

He trained under Couture for six years, finally leaving in 1856 and starting his own studio in the rue Lavoisier. His ability to set up his own space (although it was a joint endeavor with painter Albert de Balleroy) was entirely due to his financial security, which also enabled him to live his life and create art in his signature fashion. Becoming a flaneur of Parisian life and translating his observations onto his canvases came naturally for Manet. His financial security also enabled him to travel through Holland, Germany, and Austria, and to visit Italy on several occasions. In 1857, he met Henri Fantin-Latour while copying paintings at the Louvre; theirs would become an important lifelong friendship.

Many works were produced during this time, yet it was with *The Absinthe Drinker* (1858) that Manet broke from Couture's teachings and began to express his own style.

**Mature Period**
Friends with poet Charles Baudelaire and artist Gustave Courbet, Manet moved amongst other progressive thinkers who believed that art should represent modern life, not history or mythology. This was a tumultuous artistic shift that pitted the status quo of the Salon with avant-garde artists who suffered mightily at the hands of the conservative public and vicious critics. Manet was the focus of several of these controversies and the Salon of 1863 refused his paintings. Manet and others protested and the Emperor relented by putting all of the rejected works into the secondary Salon des Refuses, so the public could see what had been deemed unworthy.
The shocking *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863) drew the most criticism for a number of reasons. The Renaissance allusions did not make sense to viewers, but what they did understand was the shameless and realistically rendered nudity of a woman - likely a prostitute - staring at them from the canvas. Critiques included comments that the painting was "vulgar," "immodest," and "unartistic," comments that deeply distressed Manet and likely caused him a serious bout with depression.

Being included in the Salon des Refuses would have been upsetting for Manet's ego and personal reputation. His rebellious instincts encouraged him to want to change the system of exclusion under which the institutions - i.e. the Salon and Ecole des Beaux Arts - operated, but he did not want them eliminated. Firm in his upper-middle class background, Manet was embedded with certain ideals of achievement and he wished to be successful at the Salon - only on his terms, not theirs. The result was the creation of an unwitting revolutionary, and, arguably, the first modern artist.

More controversies continued in the following year when he produced *Olympia* (1863), which featured another nude of his favorite model, Victorine Meurent. Manet claimed to see the truth in her face, while painting her entire body for the world to see. This proved to be too confrontational and unacceptable to the Parisian public when viewed at the 1865 Salon. He wrote to an unsympathetic Baudelaire, "They are raining insults upon me, I've never been led such a dance."

After the death of Manet's father in 1862, he and Suzanne wed to legitimize their relationship, although their son Leon may never have known his true parentage. Manet's mother had likely helped the two conspire to keep the secret from Manet's father as he would not have tolerated the disgrace of an illegitimate child in the family. This would have been the end of Manet's artistic career before it even began. There has also been some speculation that Leon was actually Manet's father's child, but this is extremely unlikely.
In 1864, Manet lived on the rue des Batignolles, and from 1866 he began to hold court every Thursday at the Cafe Guerbois, with the likes of Henri Fantin-Latour, Edgar Degas, Emile Zola, Felix Felix Nadar, Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, and, by 1868, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley. The meetings of what Zola termed "the Batignolles Group" were a mixture of personalities, attitudes, and classes; all joined together as independent-minded, avant-garde artists to forge the principles of their new artistic styles. With the assembling of such minds and talents on a regular basis, there was a great degree of mutual influence and such a mixing of ideas that they could all be said to have influenced one another. However, Manet was an early leader with his avant-garde realism, along with Monet and Renoir, who eventually emerged as leaders of what would be called Impressionism.

The Salon of 1866 refused his pieces The Fifer (1866) and The Tragic Actor (1866). In response, Manet held a public exhibition in his own studio. In support of this avant-garde move, Zola wrote an essay about Manet in L'Evenement, for which he was fired. The following year Manet was excluded from the Paris Exposition Universelle, and decided not to submit anything to the Salon and instead set up a tent near Courbet's to exhibit his work outside the Exposition, where he again was criticized soundly.

Having painted a troupe of Spanish performers in 1861, Manet had been interested in Spanish culture, and after visiting Spain in 1865 he was affected by the works of Diego Velázquez and Francisco Goya. This was expressed both in his style and subject matter. As a staunch Republican, Manet was unhappy with Napoleon III's government. In the painting The Execution of Emperor Maximilian (1867), which compositionally gave a nod to Goya, he implicated the French government in the tragic death of Maximilian in Mexico. This work was considered too politically controversial and its display was forbidden, even in his own tent.

Another important meeting was in 1868, when Henri Fantin-Latour introduced Manet to the Morisot sisters. Manet's relationship with Impressionist painter Berthe Morisot was fraught at best. He respected her as a painter, and even had her model for him on multiple occasions. While there was a mutual infatuation, a true affair was impossible. So to avoid any domestic disturbances, Morisot married Manet's younger brother Eugene. This effectively ended their personal relationship, as Morisot never sat for him again, but she never stopped being Manet's biggest advocate.
Fantin-Latour's *A Studio at Batignolles* (1870), which depicts a gathering of Monet, Zola, Bazille, and Renoir, among others, all admiring Manet as he paints in his own studio, demonstrates Manet's significance to the modern art world. However, while some of his friends, like Monet, went to London to escape the Franco-Prussian War, Manet joined the National Guard. The political events of the next few years forced Manet to stay out of Paris, returning only briefly during the Versailles repression. He was later forced to leave his destroyed studio and set up in the rue de Saint-Petersbourg in 1872.

While the public disliked his *Bon Bock* (1873), in the Salon of 1873, despite it receiving an honorable mention, several of his paintings were well received later that year, with fifteen works selling to one buyer alone. Yet Manet angered the Salon once again, in 1875, with his submission *Argenteuil* (1874), which showed a lighter palette and the influence of Monet's Impressionism. With *Argenteuil*, Manet sent the Salon what was essentially a manifesto of the emerging style, intended for those who had not attended the group's seminal exhibition in 1874.

In 1876 the Salon rejected several of his works, so Manet responded by hosting another exhibition at his own studio, which drew over 4,000 visitors. And while many in the press claimed the Salon's rejection was unfair, he continued to be ostracized, with a subsequent denial coming in 1877. Refusing to submit to the 1878 Salon or to hold his own exhibition, Manet showed nothing that year and instead changed studios. Coincidently, that same year ill health began to affect his daily life.

**Late Period**

After taking some time away from Paris to aid his declining health, at the Salon of 1880 Manet was awarded a 2nd place medal, granting him a pass from future competition and the chance to become a permanent exhibitor at all future Salons. Among further accolades, Manet was awarded the Legion of Honor in 1881. Continuing his life as the *flaneur*, Manet recorded the modern changes in the streets of Paris and the lives of its inhabitants. The cafe concerts were a great symbol of these changes - a place where
men and women from varying levels of society were able to mingle, enjoying company, drinks, and entertainment. Set in his favorite cafe concert, he created one of his most lauded works, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere* (1881-82). This work, along with *Spring* (1881), was well received at the 1882 Salon.

Manet continued to paint portraits of women, still-lifes, landscapes, and flowers, even from his sickbed (he was unable to visit his studio in the last months of his life). Succumbing to a nervous disorder - most likely from tertiary syphilis - Manet died at only 51 years of age. In his will, he left his estate to Suzanne and obliged her to leave everything to Leon upon her death, which for all practical purposes confirms Leon as Édouard Manet's son and heir.

**LEGACY**

After his death, Manet's wife and friends worked to secure his memory and legacy, through extraordinary sales of his paintings, acquisitions by the French government, and by publishing several biographies. Considered by many art historians to be the father of modern art, Manet's influence on art and the art world is immeasurable. While greatness and scandal characterized his professional life, his desire for respectability ultimately dictated his private life. In spite of his relatively short career, spanning a little over two decades, his works are held in most major international museums and galleries.

**EDOUARD MANET QUOTES**

"You would hardly believe how difficult it is to place a figure alone on a canvas, and to concentrate all the interest on this single and universal figure and still keep it living and real."

"There are no lines in nature, only areas of color, one against another."

"A painter can say all he wants to with fruit or flowers or even clouds... You know, I should like to be the Saint Francis of still life."

"No one can be a painter unless he cares for painting above all else."
"There is only one true thing: instantly paint what you see. When you’ve got it, you’ve got it. When you haven't, you begin again. All the rest is humbug."

"It is not enough to know your craft - you have to have feeling. Science is all very well, but for us imagination is worth far more."