Stephen F. Eisenman

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A CRITICAL HISTORY

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MANET AND THE IMPRESSIONISTS

EDOUARD MANET AND HAUSSMANNIZATION

EDOUARD MANET WAS BORN IN PARIS IN 1832 AND died there in 1883, a lifespan largely coincident with the modernization of the French capital. Until 1850, Paris was still in many respects medieval: its streets were narrow and twisting, many houses were made of wood, and water and sewage facilities were inadequate at best. As the population of the city grew—it reached one million by 1836 and one and a half million by 1856—city squares, parks, and cemeteries were built over, seriously restricting the healthy passage of light and air and the movement of people and goods. The progress of commerce and industry and the battle against tuberculosis and cholera were thus seriously compromised at mid-century, by the occluded urban pattern and decrepit infrastructure of Paris.

All this began to change in 1852. Within days of the Napoleonic *coup d'état*, the Emperor announced a massive public works project to redesign and rebuild the city of Paris. Implemented under the supervision of a city superintendent, Baron Georges Haussmann, the campaign—which lasted for the entire Second Empire—resulted in the construction of new water and sewer systems, the cutting of new boulevards and the straightening and widening of old ones, the installation of street lighting, the creation of parks and transportation hubs and the building of new, speculative residential and commercial structures.

In addition to improving health and transportation, the intention of the Emperor and his superintendent was to secure popular consent or obedience to undemocratic rule: the public works program provided employment for thousands at a time of massive unemployment, and the urban renewal broke up the radical communities that existed in the Cité and the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, among other places. The rebuilding of Paris was thus a strategic as much as it was an economic endeavor, and while it may not be strictly true, as many at the time believed, that the boulevards were straightened to facilitate the flight of canonballs, the idea cannot have been wholly absent from the minds of the governors of a city that had already witnessed three revolutions in as many generations. Indeed, those fine, straight avenues were put to efficient use during the mass executions that followed the defeat of the Paris Commune in the late Spring of 1871, as shown by Manet in his drawing called *The Barricade* (ca. 1871). 231

The social and cultural, as much as the economic and strategic, effects of Haussmannization (as the rebuilding came to be called) were tremendous. Within a generation, Paris became the place we know today, a city of fashion, elegance, effrontery, and detachment. Architectural homogeneity replaced urban syncretism; class segregation replaced social integration; a *blasé* public attitude replaced a changeable and energetic mien. Where rich and poor had once lived in relative proximity, they were now increasingly separated from each other, the former in the smart new apartment blocks lining the *grands boulevards* on the right bank of the Seine, and the latter in the houses and tenements of the *communes annexées*, such as Ménilmontant, Belleville and La Villette, outlying the city. Whereas in former times the center of the city was marked by the confused crush and din of carriage traffic, travelers, beggars, entertainers, and street hawkers of every kind—old-clothes men, crockery menders, dog barbers, and others—it was now, as Baedeker's wrote, "a far less noisy place than many other large cities . . . [a place of] comparative tranquility." Whereas in a previous age, the signs of social class, occupation, and sexual availability were instantly readable in costume and deportment, the mass-produced

clothes sold in the new department stores, combined with the growth of a lower middle class between bourgeois and proletarian, made such identifications more difficult. The city became a place inhabited by strangers, orphans, and refugees.

The extent of the erosion of the rich and complex symbolic life in Paris during the Second Empire can easily be exaggerated. The fear and disparagment of modernity, after all, are integral parts of modern culture itself, and can be traced, as Raymond Williams has shown, to the time of Piers Plowman if not before. Alarms concerning urban desecration and alienation in Paris were being issued by Victor Hugo in the preface to *Nôtre-Dame de Paris* from 1830 and by Balzac in *Les Petits Bourgeois* a decade later. Nevertheless, the appearance in Paris of a number of strange and neurotic symptoms at approximately mid-century would seem to point to the uniqueness of the changes that overtook the capital at this time. *Flaneurie* and modernist painting are two related examples of this symptomatology.

Seeking to cushion themselves against the shocks of capital, or to carve out an identity in an environment increasingly bereft of social markers, a number of individuals, including the poet Baudelaire and the painter Manet, adopted the subcultural stance of the *flaneur*. The very embodiment of the modern male individualist "become more and more himself," the *flaneur* was a perpetual idler, browser, or window-shopper who saw the city of Paris as a spectacle created for his entertainment, and judged commodities to be icons made for his veneration. "The street becomes a dwelling place for the *flaneur*," Walter Benjamin has written:

231 EDOUARD MANET *The Barricade* ca. 1871. 18⅜ × 13⅛ (46.5 × 33.4)

> he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. To him the shiny, enamelled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon. The walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done. That life, in all its variety and inexhaustible wealth of variations . . . [thrived] among the grey cobble streets and against the grey background of despotism.

The *flaneur* slowly strolled the streets of Paris, scrutinizing everything he saw, like a detective searching for clues to help him solve a mysterious crime. In such difficult cases, every piece of evidence counts: the cut of a sleeve or trouser, the sheen on a piece of satin, the trim of whiskers, and the depth of a plunging neckline are all prerequisite for the discovery of identity in a city of strangers. And the work of detection in Paris was all the more subtle and rewarding given the meagerness of the signs of social and psychological difference on display, as, for example, in the Tuileries park, in Manet's *Music in the Tuileries* (1862), or on a balcony, as in his *A Balcony* (1868–9). 232–3

In *Music in the Tuileries*, perhaps the "earliest true example of modern painting in both subject matter and technique," as the art historian and curator Françoise Cachin wrote, Manet has interspersed his many fashionable friends and acquaintances among a larger cross section of elegant society. Manet himself stands at the far left, brush in hand; Baudelaire stands in lost profile, coincident with the largest tree at middle left; beneath him sit the Mmes. Lejosne and Loubens, distinguished wives of notable men in government and education; Eugène Manet—the painter's brother—also stands in profile, bowing and facing left in the middle right foreground; seated just to the right is the composer Jacques Offenbach, with moustache, no beard, and neatly circumscribed by the largest tree at middle right. The painting constitutes, in brief, a kind of Parisian, elite *roman à clef*, in which the table is turned upon the *flaneur*; now he is subject to perusal; now his costume and features—hidden beneath a blur of white, black, and tan and a confused tangle of phallic trees (or exclamation points!)—will be spied for signs of class and temperament.

232 EDOUARD MANET *Music in the Tuileries* 1862. 30 × 46½ (76 × 118)

A similar reversal of the position of seer and seen is effected in *A Balcony* (and in Cassatt's *Woman in Black at the Opera:* see pp. 263–4). There, two women dressed in white with green accessories, a man in black with blue cravat, a servant in the upper left shadows, and an uncertain breed of dog at the lower left, all pose behind a green iron balcony and between green shutters. The seated woman is the painter Berthe Morisot (1841–95), whose particular keenness of vision and insight would be revealed in her paintings of the next decade (see also pp. 253–4). They cast their eyes left, right, and center in imitation of the shifting gaze of the bewildered spectators who saw the work at the Salon of 1869. "This contradictory attitude [of the two women in *The Balcony*]," Castagnary wrote, "bewilders me. . . . Like characters in a comedy, so in a painting each figure must be in place, play its part and so contribute to the expression of the general idea." Manet would accept no such circumscribed role for his women characters or for himself. He pursued the much vaunted principle of individualism even at the cost of public incomprehension, comforted that he lived and worked among like-minded artists and writers on the borderland between bohemia and high society.

Artists like Manet and the painter and graphic artist Constantin Guys (1802–92)—who worked outside of the institutional framework of the Academy—were natural *flaneurs*; they had no fixed occupation and hardly even a settled abode, traveling between home and studio and vagrantly searching the city for models and motifs. "The crowd is his domaine," wrote Baudelaire about Guys, author of the vacuous drawing *The Champs-Elysées* (1855), "as the air is for birds and water is for fish. His passion and his profession is to marry [épouser] the crowd." Like Baudelaire, the male artist-*flaneur* was a politically contradictory figure. By virtue of his furtive insinuation into the middle of the crowd, and his deadpan style and humor, the *flaneur* was a minor thorn in the side of a despotic regime that survived on the pageant of manipulated consent. He was, for the most part, no patriot and no cheerleader, and was totally lacking in ingenuousness. Yet he was at the same time an eager propagandist for modernity and thus of some use: by believing with his entire heart and soul that the mass-produced clothes slung across the mannequins in the Au Bon Marché department store or draping the sloped shoulders of the good bourgeois on the Boulevard des Capucines contained the clues to a unique

identity, he was accepting and propagandizing the commodity fetishism that buttressed both the dazzling facade of the Second Empire and its "grey background of despotism." Paris was both phantasmagorical and dictatorial; it was a perpetual-motion machine that seemingly worked its magic—as Delacroix had noted at the 1855 Exposition—entirely of its own volition and independent of the labor of workers or the struggle of classes and genders. Paris, with its gaslighted boulevards and omnibuses, glass-fronted stores that functioned like reliquaries, glass-roofed arcades that resembled Gothic cathedrals, and mock festive *café-concerts* with names like Alcazar, El Dorado, and Ambassadeurs, was a modern city born of the commodity and dedicated to keeping that fact a secret. *Flaneurie* was complicit in commodity fetishization and intrigue, as was the artist Manet in these pictures.

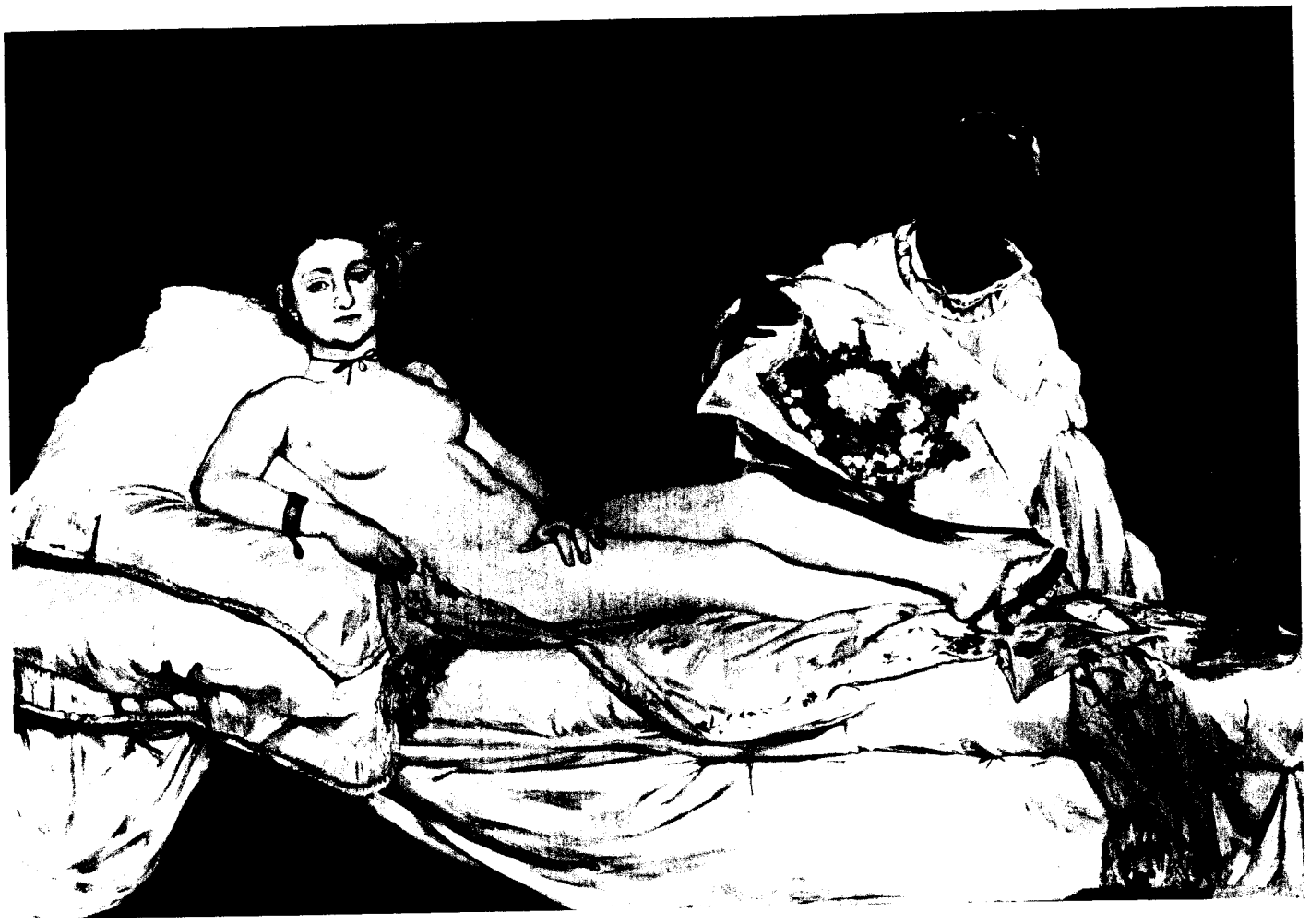
OLYMPIA

At times, however, Manet appeared to resist the given structures of class and gender ideology, thereby achieving something of the individualism or autonomy which he and his contemporaries claimed to seek. *Olympia* (1863, exhibited 1865), which immediately eclipsed his own *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) as the most notorious painting in the history of art, is the case in point. It depicts a naked white woman reclining on a bed gazing at the viewer, and a clothed black woman holding a bouquet of flowers and gazing at Olympia. A black cat arches its back at the lower right, a green drape is drawn back at the upper left, and a partition and curtain fail to meet in the middle—behind Olympia—permitting a glimpse into an alcove or waiting area beyond. The plane of the bed upon which the protagonist lies is almost exactly parallel to the spectator's line of sight, and the bedclothes at lower left and dressing-gown at lower right cascade into the viewer's space. The painting's composition is thus rather mechanically balanced between left and right, and top and bottom, further highlighting by contrast its immodest or imbalanced subject.

The handling of paint in *Olympia* is as discordant as its contents and composition. Whereas academically approved

233 EDOUARD MANET *A Balcony* 1868–9. $66\frac{1}{2} \times 49\frac{1}{4}$ (169 × 125)

234 CONSTANTIN GUYS *The Champs-Elysées* 1855. $9\frac{1}{2} \times 16\frac{3}{8}$ (24.1 × 41.6)



235 EDOUARD MANET *Olympia* 1863. $51\frac{3}{8} \times 74\frac{7}{8}$ (130.5 × 190)

Salon painting was generally highly polished, with its brushstrokes invisible and its forms smoothly modeled, *Olympia* presents something of the appearance of an *ébauche* (preliminary, rough underpainting), with its clearly distinct touches of color and abrupt contrasts of tonality, as for example on the nude's shoulders, breasts, belly, and hips. In addition, the bedclothes, dressing-gown, nude body, and paper are all hard and angular, like the drapery in works by the early Flemish painters. The overall pictorial effect of this refusal of modeling and subtle chiaroscuro, as well as of the mechanically poised compositional elements and angularity, is a flatness and ungainliness such as found in "primitive" and children's art or in Epinal prints. Like Courbet, then, Manet has sought refuge and resource in the naive and the popular: therein lies his avant-garde suit to the Salon public, one very different from the disingenuous entreaties of Academic and Official art.

The times were inauspicious for popular art, however, and Manet's *Olympia*—exhibited alongside his *Christ Mocked* at the 1865 Salon—was lambasted by the critics: "We find him again this year," wrote the usually sensible Jules Claretie, "with two dreadful canvases, challenges hurled at the public, mockeries or parodies, how can one tell? Yes mockeries. What is this Odalisque with a yellow stomach, a base model picked up I know not where who represents Olympia? . . . A courtesan no doubt." Another critic, cited by T. J. Clark in his indispensable study of the picture, spoke of Olympia as "a courtesan with dirty hands and wrinkled feet . . . her body has the livid tint of a cadaver displayed in the morgue; her outlines are drawn in charcoal and her greenish, bloodshot eyes appear to be provoking the public, protected all the while by a hideous Negress."

Manet indeed provoked critics and bourgeois public alike by his subversion of the genre of the nude and his rejection of the received ideas of sex and race. To depict nudes, "fallen" and alluring women, was, we have seen, common enough in nineteenth-century France. Couture, who was Manet's teacher between 1850 and 1856, had made a courtesan the focus of his 1847 *Romans of the Decadence*, and by 1865 the Salon walls would have seemed half-bare without their full

complement of dissolute Venuses, Bacchantes, Nymphs, Sapphos, Salomes, Dianas, and Odalisques, by the likes of Bouguereau, Cabanal, and Paul Baudry. In addition, before the decade ended, the sculptor Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (1827–75) and the painter Claude Monet (1840–1926) ventured to create what they believed to be more naturalistic representations of female figures—naked, clothed, and in ensemble. In both Carpeaux's *The Dance* (1867–9) and 5 Monet's *Women in the Garden* (1866–7) 6 women are represented in counter-clockwise orbit around a central axis; in the Monet, the fashionable women encircle a slender and animate tree, and in the Carpeaux around an adolescent male personifying "the Genius of Dance." When Carpeaux's sculptural group on the facade of the new Paris Opera was unveiled in 1869 it caused a scandal by what was seen as its "immodesty," "realism," and modernity; in fact, it was profoundly influenced by Raphael, Michelangelo, and Bernini, and formed part of the decorative ensemble of the very building that symbolized the regime of Napoleon III with all its imperial and Classical pretensions. Monet's early Impressionist *Women in the Garden* was also rejected, by the jury of the Salon, reportedly because of its potential to corrupt youthful artists, despite its Classical and hierarchically structured composition. Images of women—painted, sculpted, academic, and modern—positively dominated the visual culture of the Second Empire, but none was so controversial as Manet's.

236 FRÉDÉRIC BAZILLE *La Toilette* 1870. 83 × 79 (211 × 201)

The practise of depicting "negresses" in art, though less common, was nearly as longstanding and revered as the representation of "fallen" women: black women began to appear in painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts in the middle of the eighteenth century as allegories of Africa or in order to signal the presence of illicit or animal-like sexuality. By the early nineteenth century, when racist theories of polygenesis (the notion of the separate biological origins of humans) prevailed, they represented lasciviousness and evolutionary retardation. Delacroix, for example, whose colorism and expressive drawing style profoundly influenced Manet, had depicted a turbaned black African serving woman in his hothouse *Women of Algiers*. By the early Second 192 Empire, black women became almost ubiquitous in the Orientalist pictures of Ingres, Gérôme, Chasseriau, and Eugène Fromentin, among others. In 1870, the young Impressionist Frédéric Bazille (1841–70) painted *La Toilette* 236 in which a black woman at the lower left—perhaps the same Laura (last name unknown) who posed for Manet—is shown dressing a naked and voluptuous white woman in the center. (The composition, as well perhaps as the subject, is derived from the central figural group of Courbet's *Toilette of the Bride*, 1865, which depicts the preparation of a body for burial.) Unlike these artists, however, Manet offered his male spectators neither secure art historical moorings nor any patriarchal consolation in *Olympia*.

The body of Olympia lacked pliancy and suppleness, suggesting instead an independent sexuality which emerged, as a critic wrote, "[from beneath her] hand flexed in a sort of shameless contraction." She was not a grand courtesan paid to confirm the myths of masculine desire, but a proletarian who owned only her labor power and her sex. And as such, critics argued, she was subhuman: "A sort of female gorilla . . . ape[s] on a bed," wrote one, "a monkey," wrote a second, and "a corpse . . . from the [working-class] Rue Mouffetard," stated a third. The repeated references to Olympia's blackness and simian aspect suggest that a critical elision between the nude and the West Indian maid has occurred. The body of the lower-class prostitute and the body of the Afro-Caribbean woman, according to Manet's interlocutors, were linked by their common *dégénérescence*, that is, by their combined intellectual, physical, and moral depravity, morbidity, and inferiority. (Black women and prostitutes were widely understood, according to the science of the day, to possess congenitally deformed genitals that preconditioned them to hypersexuality.) Each was judged more grotesque than the other and harbingers of the feared degeneracy which, according to the respected doctor Bénédict Augustin Morel—author of the *Treatise on Degeneracy* (1857)—was infecting French society as a whole. Manet's picture represented something of that decay, and for that reason—as well as for its

overall pictorial strangeness—precipitated the very complicated, fantastic, and idiotic chain of criticisms that constituted its scandal.

In the end, it must be observed that Manet's *Olympia* was probably more modern than it was avant-garde, in the senses those terms have been used here. Although it represented two proletarian women, they were of the politically ambiguous *lumpen* variety; though it employed the two-dimensionality of popular art, it did so within the confines of a genre—the nude—that was, for all its rebarbativeness in Manet's case, still constitutive of the old class and gender hierarchies; and finally, though *Olympia* incited a frenzy of shrill critical antagonism, it did so in the name of no other clearly particular social class, political principle, or oppositional ideology. Manet did not succeed in fashioning a new, artistic public sphere in 1865; still less did he create a new sort of history painting to replace the once exalted and now moribund genre. "You are only the first in the decrepitude of your art," wrote Baudelaire to him in 1865 and, indeed, *Olympia* was a suitable end and beginning of painting. It marked the conclusion of a heroic tradition of art for an enlightened bourgeois public, and the origins of a modern art that instead denies or negates the verities of that class's rule. In addition, it signaled the (temporary) end of the Courbetist dream of a Realist art for the masses, and the beginning of an equally idealist dream of an autonomous art intended for a society of free individuals.

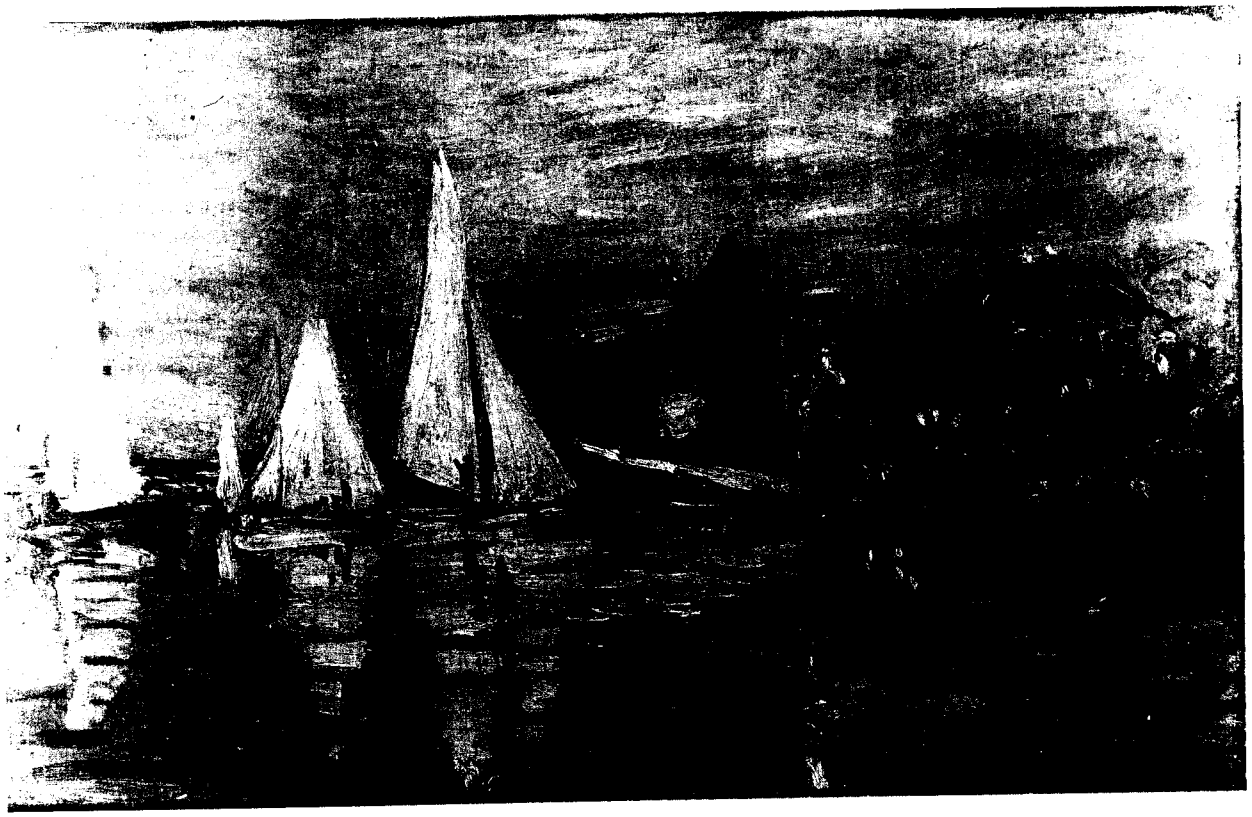
IMPRESSIONISM AND THE COMMODITY

Like the *flaneur* Manet, the Impressionists were determined to discover for themselves a semblance of the individual freedom, self-determinacy, and sensual pleasure that constituted the utopian legacy of enlightenment and revolution. Unlike him, they generally lacked irony and guile, seeing in the existing urban, and especially the suburban, spaces of modernity the dream-terrain of that quest. "Early Impressionism," as Meyer Schapiro wrote:

> had a moral aspect. In its discovery of a constantly changing phenomenal outdoor world of which the shapes depended upon the momentary position of the casual or mobile spectator, there was an implicit criticism of symbolic social and domestic formalities, or at least a norm opposed to these. It is remarkable how many pictures we have in early Impressionism of informal and spontaneous sociability, of breakfasts, picnics, promenades, boating trips, holidays and vacation travel. These urban idylls not only present the objective forms of bourgeois recreation in the 1860s and 1870s; they also reflect in the very choice of subjects and in the new aesthetic devices the conception of art as solely a field of individual enjoyment . . . for an enlightened bourgeois detached from the official beliefs of his class.

The Impressionists were indeed individualists who lacked the world-historical ambition, Romantic fervor, and avant-garde convictions of the two previous generations of French and European artists. Born around 1840, they were too young to be firebrand *quarant-huitards*, but were old enough to watch in shock and horror (mostly from a safe distance) the Prussian dismemberment of France in 1870–71, and the French massacre of its own citizens during the suppression of the Commune that followed. They beheld the industrialization of agriculture in the provinces and the Haussmannization of urban space in Paris, and understood that the old France of agrarian autarchy and distinct urban *quartiers* was no more. To all of these events and transformations, they responded for the most part with the officially approved mix of nostalgia for the old and complacency at the new. The Impressionists were thus in the main passive witnesses of, or willing propagandists for, the emerging and modern "forms of bourgeois recreation" of their day, but the acuity of their observation and the depth of their enthusiasm was such that they nevertheless managed to precipitate a crisis of representation that ended only with the severance of the formerly existing relationship between art and its public.

The term Impressionism, used after 1874 to define the group of eponymous artists, derives from the word *impression*, which Emile Littré defined in his *Dictionnaire* (1866) as "the more or less pronounced effect which exterior objects make upon the sense organs." In 1870, the word was applied by the critic Théodore Duret to Manet: "He brings back from the vision he casts on things an impression truly his own. . . . Everything is summed up, in his eyes, in a variant of coloration; each nuance or distinct color becomes a definite tone, a particular note of the palette." Duret thus described two aspects of Manet's art that have already been considered: first, its utter individuality, and secondly, its structure of discrete color "notes" juxtaposed against, but not blended with, their adjacent tone. The dual nature of Impressionism also underlay Castagnary's celebrated description of the thirty artists who exhibited together for the first time under the name Société Anonyme at the Paris studios of the photographer Nadar in 1874: "They are *Impressionists* in the sense that they render not the landscape but the sensation produced by the landscape. . . . [The Impressionists] leave reality and enter into full idealism." By "idealism," as the art historian Richard Shiff has shown, Castagnary meant the individualism of the artists, that corresponded to their technique of laying down a mosaic of colors and forms determined by the peculiar impression of the exterior world upon their sense organs.



237 CLAUDE MONET *Regatta at Argenteuil* 1872. 19 × 29½ (48 × 75)

238 CAMILLE PISSARRO *Hoarfrost* 1873. 25⅝ × 36⅝ (65 × 93)

In 1874, therefore, the term Impressionism connoted a vaguely defined technique of painting and an attitude of individualism shared by a group of allied artists unofficially led by Manet (who, however, never exhibited with them). Indeed, the two definitions are aptly conjoined, since the formal and technical innovations of the movement effectively served to represent an ideal of personal pleasure and individualist freedom. These innovations may be summed up under three rubrics: 1) the rejection of chiaroscuro; 2) the depiction of the interaction of light and color *en plein air*; and 3) the equalizing of brushstrokes across the surface of the canvas.

1) Academic painting depended upon chiaroscuro (the modeling of form and space through light and dark gradation and contrast) for its drama and putative three-dimensionality. In the early stages of their paintings, academically trained artists employed a dark, often reddish brown underpainting in order to establish a deep pictorial space even before they painted anything else. By proceeding to leave areas of shadow thinly painted and areas of mass thickly painted with bright colors and highlights, they were able to establish strong contrasts between dark and light, shadow and mass, and far
237 and near. In Monet's *Regatta at Argenteuil* (1872) and Camille
238 Pissarro's (1830–1903) *Hoarfrost* (1873), by contrast, a light-toned underpainting—creamy yellow in the first case and grey in the second—is employed instead of the conventional reddish brown. In addition, dark tones are largely eliminated from the mixtures of hue, and paint is applied in a fairly uniform thickness all across the surface of the picture. The effect of these changes from academic practise, in conjunction with others noted below, is greatly to reduce tonal contrast in the pictures and thereby to flatten them. Although Monet and Pissarro include fore-, middle-, and backgrounds in their *Regatta* and *Hoarfrost*, their elimination of chiaroscuro causes us to see all three zones as lying on approximately the same shallow, foreground plane.

2) Before the nineteenth century, artists drew but rarely painted out of doors. By the middle of the century, the painting of small outdoor *études* was common to Corot and the Barbizon school, and to the "Pre-Impressionist" painters Eugène Boudin and J.-B. Jongkind, who were active in Normandy. Yet these artists seldom painted fully finished compositions out of doors, and equally rarely exhibited their *études* at the Salons. The Impressionists, on the other hand—especially Monet, Pissarro, Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), Morisot, and Alfred Sisley (1839–99)—painted many of their most ambitious works *en plein air*, and discovered a technique for evoking the interaction of light and air in nature.
246 Monet's *Women in the Garden*, considered earlier for the conservatism of its subject and composition, was nevertheless almost unprecedented in its depiction of colored shadows and light. Painted almost entirely *en plein air* (the artist actually dug a trench into which he could lower the work so as to paint its upper reaches without changing his point of view), *Women in the Garden* features colored shadows and the juxtaposition of warm and cool hues to achieve modeling of faces and hands. The dress of the woman at left is tinted green from the filtration of light through the canopy of trees, and the shadows on the dress of the seated woman in the foreground are tinted violet, the complement of the yellow light of the sun. The women's faces and hands, as well as their bouquets of flowers, are made vivid by the juxtaposition of similar, and especially complementary, colors—red/green, blue/orange, and yellow/violet—and by the use of thick, broad patches of paint. The optical effect of complements, which are pronounced in *Regatta at Argenteuil* (red/green) and Pissarro's *Hoarfrost* (yellow/violet), was described by Monet in 1888: "Color owes its brightness to force of contrast rather than to inherent qualities; . . . primary colors look brightest when they are brought into contrast with complementarities."

3) Most paintings submitted for exhibition at the Salons had a surface that was smooth, clean, and impersonal, whereas most paintings shown at the eight Impressionist exhibitions held between 1874 and 1886 had coarse, irregular, and idiosyncratic surfaces. Indeed, as much as for its rejection of chiaroscuro and its embrace of *plein air*, Impressionism was notable in its day for the use of discrete patches (*taches*) of color. To be sure, a loaded brush and impasto technique were deployed by Rubens and Rembrandt among many other artists from the past, but rarely had they covered their works with such a density of paint regardless of the subject depicted. In Pissarro's *Corner of a Village in Winter* (1877) and Renoir's *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* (1876) the entire canvas surface is 23
densely clotted with paint. Individual brushstrokes are varied in width, breadth, and direction, and the pictorial field is uniformly animate, agitated, and immediate. The complex and dynamic Impressionist *tache* was largely responsible for the incomprehension and anger of the critics: "Seen up close [Pissarro's landscapes] are incomprehensible and hideous;" wrote Léon de Lora in 1877, "seen from a distance they are hideous and incomprehensible." "I recommend Renoir's *The Swing* [1876]," wrote Bertall (Charles Albert d'Arnoux) in 1876, "sublime in its grotesqueness . . . and *Bal du Moulin de la Galette*, which is in no way inferior to his other work in its incoherence of draftsmanship, composition, and color."

In the face of the reigning formal and technical paradigms of Salon art, Impressionism offered nothing less than a redefinition of the pictorial. If the Classical and academic tradition insisted that a picture should be a recreation in two dimensions of the three-dimensional world, that is, if painting was previously conceived as first and foremost mimetic, Impressionist art was first of all optical. In 1876, the poet

239 AUGUSTE RENOIR *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* 1876. 51½ × 68⅞ (131 × 175)

Stéphane Mallarmé wrote an essay entitled "The Impressionists and Edouard Manet," in which he precisely described Impressionism as the return of art to its "simplest perfection:"

> The scope and aim . . . of Manet and his followers is that painting shall be steeped again in its cause, and its relation to nature. But what, except to decorate the ceilings of saloons and palaces with a crowd of idealized types in magnificent foreshortening, what can be the aim of a painter before everyday nature? To imitate her? Then his best efforts can never equal the original with the inestimable advantage of life and space. . . . [That] which I [the artist] preserve through the power of Impressionism is not the material portion which already exists, superior to any mere representation of it, but the delight of having recreated nature touch by touch. I leave the massive and tangible solidity to its fitter exponent, sculpture. I content myself with reflecting on the clear and durable mirror of painting, that which perpetually lives yet dies every moment, which only exists by the will of Idea, yet constitutes in my domain the only authentic and certain merit of nature—the Aspect.

Although sculpture may be fit to reproduce the tactile qualities of nature, Mallarmé's ideal Impressionist argues, painting is not. It can only focus upon "the clear and durable mirror of painting," that is, upon the flattened, optical screen which constitutes the artist's field of vision; the Impressionist painter's responsibility and delight is to reproduce nature's "aspect" touch by touch.

The Impressionist world, according to this view, is one which cannot be manipulated, grasped, or even touched, except with the eyes. It is a world where use-value has been banished, and exchange-value—which posits the universal equality of things—enshrined instead. For the Impressionist painter, nature and the built environment appear as commodity-forms, or fetishes (as defined by Marx), alienated from the biological processes or human labor that brought them into being. Indeed, Impressionist optics and style—defined by their negotiation and compromise between hues across the flat expanse of the picture surface—may be said to repeat the mistaking of illusion for reality that constitutes the basis of commodity fetishism. In the first volume of *Capital* (1867) Marx described the "mysterious character" of the commodity-form as consisting in the fact that it (mis)represents the social and class relations of the human labor that produced it as an autonomous relationship between things:

240 GUSTAVE CAILLEBOTTE *A Balcony, Boulevard Haussmann* ca. 1880. 26¾ × 24 (67.9 × 61)

> Through this substitution [by the social relations between objects for the social relation between producers], the products of labor become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. In the same way, the impression [*Lichteindruck*] made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye.

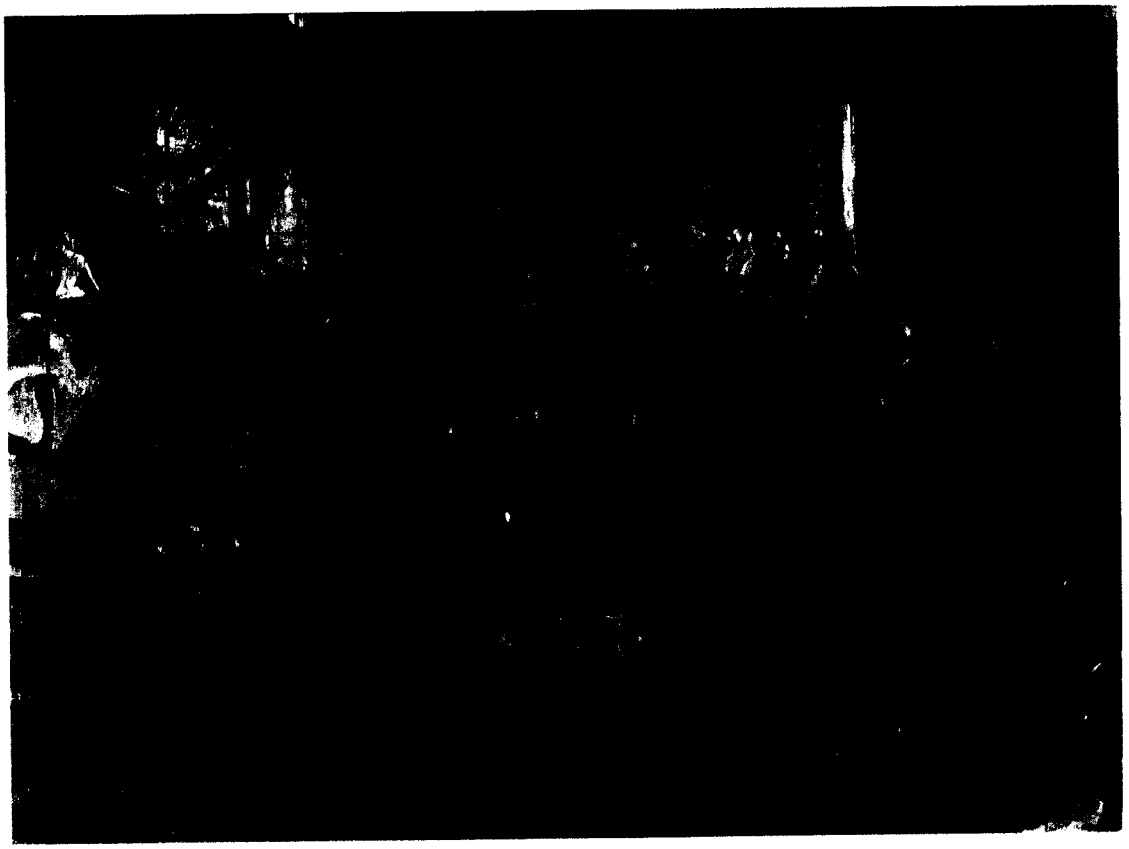
Impressionist art is precisely concerned with the bestowal of a phantasmagorical reality upon "the objective form of thing[s] outside the eye." In 1883, the poet Jules Laforgue described the magic of Impressionist color:

> In a landscape flooded with light . . . where the academic painter sees nothing but a broad expanse of whiteness, the Impressionist sees light as bathing everything not with a dead whiteness, but rather with a thousand vibrant struggling colours of rich prismatic decomposition. Where the one sees only the external outline of objects, the other sees the real living lines built not in geometric forms but in a thousand irregular strokes, which at a distance, establish life. . . .
>
> The Impressionist sees and renders nature as it is—that is, wholly in the vibration of color. No drawing, light,

241 CAMILLE PISSARRO *Edge of the Woods or, Undergrowth in Summer* 1879. 49⅝ × 63¾ (126 × 162)

242 (*left*) EDGAR DEGAS *Portraits at the Stock Exchange* ca. 1879. $39\frac{1}{8} \times 32\frac{3}{8}$ (100 × 82)

243 (*above*) EDGAR DEGAS *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* ca. 1881. Height 39 (99.1)



244 EDGAR DEGAS *The Dance School* 1873. $19 \times 24\frac{5}{8}$ (48.3 × 62.5)

245 JEAN-BAPTISTE CARPEAUX *The Dance* 1867–9. Height 13'9⅜ (420)

modelling, perspective or chiaroscuro, none of those childish classifications: all these are in reality converted into the vibration of color and must be obtained on the canvas solely by the vibration of color. . . . [In the work of] Monet and Pissarro, everything is obtained by a thousand little dancing strokes in every direction like straws of color—all in vital competition for the whole impression.

The fetishistic character of Impressionist art, with its "real living lines" which "establish life," has of course been revealed by its subsequent commercial and institutional history. As early as the mid-1880's, the French dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, backed by the financier Charles Edwards, succeeded in establishing an international market for Impressionist works, with exhibitions and sales in Berlin, Boston, New York, Rotterdam, and London, as well as Paris. Indeed, the key years for the transformation of French art dealers from petty tradesmen to international entrepreneurial capitalists coincided with the rise and success of Impressionism. (To this day, works by Monet, Renoir, Degas, and the others are common tender in the international art market.) Moreover, the exchange-value represented by Impressionist art did not remain circumscribed by the narrow confines of the trade. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the forms and imagery of Impressionism have informed and invigorated the publicity apparatus of many of the key culture and leisure industries of Europe, North America, and (more lately) Japan, including suburban, vacation, and retirement homes, travel and tourism, automobiles, home gardening, sportswear, and health and exercise products. The modern bourgeois world, it may be claimed with only slight exaggeration, has modeled itself upon the "aspect" of Impressionism.

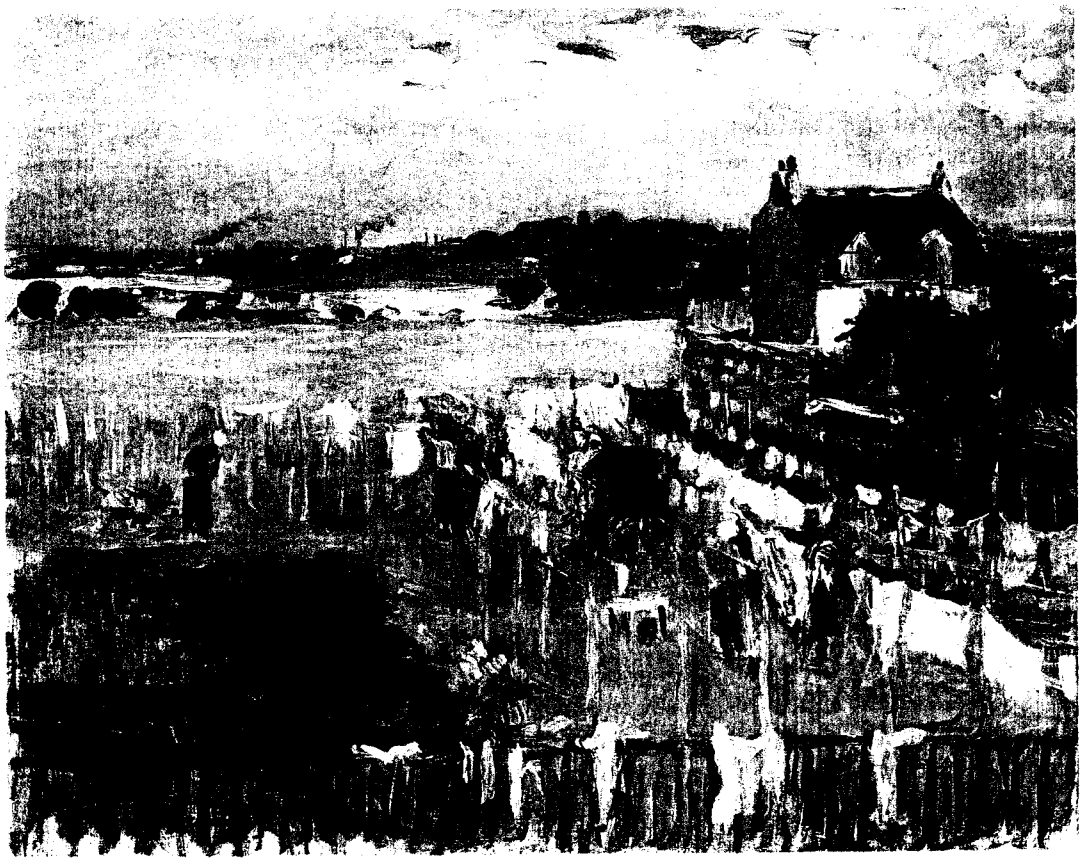
But the gift of ideology has not been all in one direction. The triumph of modern tourism and leisure has also tended to inform prevailing interpretations of Impressionism, masking the genuinely counter-cultural and even subversive aspects of the movement. Indeed, in the years between its first (1874) and third (1877) exhibitions, the self-proclaimed Société Anonyme was often dubbed in the press "the Intransigents," a term from the contemporary political lexicon, as I have shown elsewhere, meaning radical, anarchist or communist. "At first they were called 'the painters of the open air'," wrote the critic Marius Chaumelin in 1876: "They were then given a generous name, 'Impressionists,' which no doubt brought pleasure to Mlle Berthe Morisot and to the other young lady painters who have embraced these doctrines. But there is a title which described them much better, that is the *Intransigents*. . . . They have a hatred for classical traditions and an ambition to reform the laws of drawing and color. They preach the separation of Academy and State. They demand an amnesty for the 'school of the *taches*,' of whom M. Manet was the founder and to whom they are all indebted." With less irony, the critic for the official *Moniteur Universel* flatly stated: "The Intransigents in art holding hands with the Intransigents in politics, nothing could be more natural."

At the same time that these critics were condemning the Impressionists as political Intransigents, Mallarmé was applauding them for the same reason. In the essay cited above, he forthrightly argued that Impressionist art was an expression of working-class—not bourgeois—vision, and a celebration of the newly emergent ideology of collectivism:

At a time when the romantic tradition of the first half of the century only lingers among a few surviving masters of that time, the transition from the old imaginative artist and dreamer to the energetic modern worker is found in Impressionism. The participation of a hitherto ignored people in the political life of France is a social fact that will honour the whole of the close of the nineteenth century. A parallel is found in artistic matters, the way being prepared by an evolution which the public with rare prescience dubbed, from its first appearance, *Intransigent*, which in political language means radical and democratic.

246 **CLAUDE MONET** *Women in the Garden* 1866–7. 8′4 × 81 (255 × 205)

247 **BERTHE MORISOT** *Laundresses Hanging Out the Wash* 1875. 13 × 16 (33 × 40.6)



248 EDOUARD MANET *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* ca. 1882. $37\frac{3}{4} \times 51\frac{1}{8}$ (96 × 130)

To Mallarmé, therefore, Impressionism marked a new stage in the social and cultural evolution of France; it was an art of "truth, simplicity and child-like charm," he wrote, which affirmed and paid homage to the mode of vision of a new and surging working-class "multitude [which] demands to see with its own eyes."

Two conflicting interpretations of Impressionism thus appear to be on offer: one situates the movement beside the other early manifestations—vaudeville shows, spectator sports, World's Fairs, and Sundays in the country—of the emergent culture of commodity capitalism; the other locates the movement within the radical confines of the avant-garde, accepting Mallarmé's contention that Impressionism—by rejecting Classical mimesis and Romantic fantasy—was the vision and voice of an increasingly self-conscious and confident proletariat. In fact, both interpretations have validity, because modern capital has consistently fed from the plate of the avant-garde. From its shaky origins in Haussmanized Paris, to its swaggering maturity today, mass (commodity) culture has learned about what desires it can exploit from observation of the ways in which avant-gardes and other subcultures devise strategies for self-fulfillment and individual expression. Impressionist leisure and vision—with its easefulness, unproductiveness, ephemerality, intangibility, luminosity, colorism, and overall opticality—was one such strategy for sensual emancipation and personal pleasure that could not be ignored. It was not, and a certain part of the world was eventually made over into its image.

As for the artists themselves, they resisted labels of all kinds; by the mid-1880's, the shifting alliance of men and women that first coalesced in 1874 had rejected the names Société Anonyme, Impressionist, Intransigent, and even Independent, preferring to designate the various group and solo exhibitions simply by the word "Exhibition." Indeed, the group's struggles over nomenclature signal the presence of a specifically modernist, formal strategy of evasiveness, dis-

nent, effacement, and abstraction. In their art as well as ideology, the Impressionists sought refuge on the ns or in the shadows: they cultivated the borderlands of nd country at Montmartre or Gennevilliers (where the waste of Paris was spread as manure), as in Morisot's hy *Laundresses Hanging Out the Wash* (1875); they spied balconies or crouched in woodland glades, as in Gustave ebotte's (1848–94) *A Balcony, Boulevard Haussmann* (ca.) and Pissarro's *Edge of the Woods or, Undergrowth in ner* (1879); and they secreted themselves backstage at the t, or amid the crowd outside the Bourse, as in Degas's 4–1917) *The Dance School* (1873) and *Portraits at the k Exchange* (ca. 1879).

the latter two works, exhibited respectively at the third fourth Impressionist Exhibitions in 1877 and 1879, Degas layed his peculiar naturalist and conspiratorial penchants. dancers are so many diverse examples of a single common ies; they bend, stretch, gaze vacantly, scratch, bite nbs, practise at the bar, and stand on toes. The alien racter of Degas's dancers is perhaps even more apparent in dozens of mostly small wax figures he made between roximately 1870 and his death. His *Little Dancer Aged rteen* (ca. 1881), the only sculpture by him exhibited in his time, was described by critics as a "monkey," and "a nster . . . [from] a museum of zoology." In *Portraits,* Degas chosen to examine another modern institution—no less tic and marked with *dégénérescence* than the world of the let—the Stock Exchange. "A few minutes before noon," ites Baedeker's (1882), "the Place de la Bourse begins to sent a busy scene . . . [as] the money-seeking throng hurries o the building. . . . [Inside], amidst the Babel of tongues, are ard the constantly recurring words '*J'ai . . . ; qui-est qui . . ? je prends; je vends!*' " Standing on the threshold of urse, the Jewish banker and art collector Ernest May is own receiving a note from a man in front of him (actually ly a detached hand and profile head), and a conspiratorial p on the shoulder from a man behind (Nochlin has defined e gesture as "confidential touching"). In the wings at left are vo more figures whose prominent noses and abbreviated rows connote—according to the physiognomic and psycho- gical theories of the day—both degeneracy and Jewishness. Indeed, in 1881 Degas depicted a similar pair of heads in astel and called them *Criminal Physiognomies.*) In *Portraits at he Stock Exchange,* therefore, Degas has indulged that most ernicious and consequential of modern myths—announced y the "Young Hegelian" philosopher Bruno Bauer in 1843, eiterated by Marx, and espoused as gospel by a subsequent eneration of anti-Semites that included the notorious Frenchman Edouard Drumont and Degas: "The Jew, who may be entirely without rights in the smallest . . . state, decides the destiny of Europe." "Anti-Semite" was in fact the only label that Degas ever wholeheartedly embraced, but for him as for others it too functioned as a disguise, hiding class and gender antagonisms behind a false brotherhood built upon a common hatred.

Fortunately, Impressionist evasiveness and disguise was rarely so paranoid and humorless as it was with Degas. More often it involved mysterious masks at fancy-dress balls and preposterous boating clothes at the dockside as in Manet's *Masked Ball at the Opéra* and *Argenteuil* (1874); at other times, it took the form of bathing costumes worn by the petit bourgeois at La Grenouillère, a popular bathing spot on the Seine, near Bougival, painted in 1869 by Monet and Renoir, or else of garishly illumined evening clothes at *café-concerts* such as the Folies-Bergère, painted by Manet in his last major work, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère,* shown at the Salon of 1882. 248
Indeed, *café-concerts,* which were popular hang-outs for Degas, Manet, and the young Georges Seurat, were devised precisely in order to accommodate disguise: "Here [at the café Eldorado] amid volumes of smoke," the guide-book author Galignani informed the tourist in 1862, "the blouse and the frock-coat are conspicuous, interspersed here and there with a muslin cap and merino gown, listening to the comic scenes, or snatches from favorite operas, retailed to the audience by the performers."

The *Bar* by Manet, with its recalcitrant mirror and equally refractory barmaid, reveals a complex understanding of class and gender that is also apparent in works by Berthe Morisot. In the *Bar,* as in Morisot's *The Psyché* (1876), a woman stands 249
before a mirror that fails accurately to reflect her. The barmaid who confronts the spectator is upright and poised whereas her mirror image is bent forward in unsavory conversation with the top-hatted customer at right. Moreover, the location of the barmaid and reflected dandy implies that the mirror is curved, whereas the reflections of the bottles and the marble-top bar suggest that it is flat or parallel to the picture surface. The result of this purposeful ambiguity (the painted study in Amsterdam has the reflection approximately right), and of Manet's studied indifference to face painting, is the creation of a peculiar tension—a sense of "detachment," as T. J. Clark writes—between the barmaid and her glittering modern ambience. Unlike Galignani's securely classed café patrons, she wears her costume and expression uneasily, and the (male) spectator responds with doubts about the stability of the game of class and gender which he plays.

In Morisot's painting, too, the empirical validity of "the mirror of painting," in Mallarmé's phrase, is challenged. The woman who stands bunching her loose peignoir before the psyché mirror, exposes a seductively supple shoulder, downcast eye, and pouty mouth, whereas the image in the mirror reveals no such conventional signs of *coquetterie* (save the Olympia-like neck ribbon). Instead of celebrating the mascu-

249 BERTHE MORISOT *The Psyché* 1876. 25¼ × 21¼ (64 × 54)

line prerogative to see and the feminine responsibility to be seen, therefore, Morisot's toilette paintings such as this one expose the artifice and irony of modern painting made by a woman. To paint a picture, Morisot seems to claim, is no more, but also no less, than artistically to adorn one's own body. In both *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère* and *The Psyché* the established circuits of sexual seeing and knowing—of temptation and desire—are crossed and produce a spark of insight. *Café-concert* and boudoir are thus alike in modern Paris; they are the places where class and gender—at once hidden and revealed by the fashionable dazzle of electric lights, trapeze, make-up, and lace—are made over into commodities to be bought and sold like so many bottles of beer or bolts of chiffon.

Impressionisme is a masculine noun, Larousse tells us, but in its intimacy with fashion and the commodity it was gendered feminine. Indeed, among the greatest practitioners of Impressionism, only Berthe Morisot and to a lesser extent Mary Cassatt managed to escape the withering criticisms flung at the movement. Praised for possessing charm, sensibility, grace, and delicacy, paintings by the two women were exempted from the usual charge against Impressionist works, that they were merely unfinished sketches. Impulsiveness, sensuousness, and lightness of touch were deemed essential to women's nature and therefore wholly appropriate in Impressionist works by women. Thus in addition to the marginality and elusiveness described above, a final transgressive feature of Impressionism must be noted: unlike contemporary Salon painting, it did not wholly reiterate the prevailing gender stereotypes about artmaking. Impressionisms's chief practitioners were either males who painted in a style judged appropriate only for women, or women who painted with the ambition and conviction which it was then thought could be found only among men. Cassatt, however, went still further: she actually painted the liberation of women, and in so doing helped turn American painting from a local into an international achievement.