

12 Various Authors on Manet's *Olympia*

The controversy over artistic standards that was represented by the Salon des Refusés in 1863 continued in the Salon of 1865. Again, a work by Manet focused the issue: in effect a rupture in the consensus as to what art was, and what it could – or should – address in the wider culture. Eighty-seven reviews of the Salon of 1865 have been traced by historians, seventy-two of which make reference to Manet's *Olympia*. The majority of these are formulaic or abusive, or both. A minority do discuss Manet while making little of the *Olympia* itself. In the judgement of T. J. Clark only one review, that signed 'Jean Ravenel', seriously grasps the implications of the work, and even then its manner is troubled and staccato. The review appeared in a left-wing paper, *L'Époque*. The name 'Jean Ravenel' was a *nom de plume* of Alfred Sensier, the socialist writer and correspondent of Millet. The verses quoted by Ravenel are from Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, from 'Le Chat' and 'Les Phares' respectively. In the exhibition catalogue, Manet had placed next to his title *Olympia* the following verse by Zacharie Astruc: 'Quand, lasse de songer, Olympia s'éveille, / Le printemps entre au bras du doux messenger noir; / C'est l'esclave, à la nuit amoureuse pareille, / Qui vient fleurir le jour délicieux à voir; / L'auguste jeune fille en qui la flamme veille'. In Clark's translation this is rendered as: 'When, weary of dreaming, Olympia wakes, Spring enters in the arms of a gentle black messenger; it is the slave, like the amorous night, who comes to make the day bloom, delicious to see: the august young girl in whom the fire burns'. We reproduce here short extracts from twenty reviews. Numbers i-xv are taken from George Heard Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954, pp. 70–8 of the 1986 edition; numbers xvi-xx are taken from T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985, pp. 94, 96, 139–40. We reproduce the extracts as they have been previously excerpted from the original texts for the same reasons given at IIIb11.

(i) A. J. Du Pays in *L'Illustration*

Separate mention must be made of the black painting of the *Saint Sebastian* by [Théodule] Ribot who, finding his inspiration in the crude manner of Ribera, wantonly cultivates ugliness but displays energetically pictorial qualities. A much more pronounced ugliness is still apparent in Manet's paintings, *Olympia* and *Christ Scourged*, whose pictorial values we confess we do not appreciate. They are offensive eccentricities and lively sensations of the Salon.

(ii) Charles Clément in *Le Journal des débats*

As to the two canvasses contributed by Manet, they are beyond words. It would have been very unfortunate to reject them. An example was required. The jury accepted them. It was well done.

(iii) Paul de Saint-Victor in *La Presse*

The mob, as at the Morgue, crowds around the spicy *Olympia* and the frightful *Ecce Homo* by Manet. Art sunk so low doesn't even deserve reproach. 'Do not speak of

them; observe and pass on', Virgil says to Dante while crossing one of the abysses of hell. But Manet's characters belong rather to Scarron's hell than to Dante's.

(iv) Félix Jahyer in *Étude sur les Beaux-Arts, Salon de 1865*

Such indecency! It seems to me that *Olympia* could have been hung at a height out of range of the eye where certain unassuming studies by conscientious workers have been lost... I cannot take this painter's intentions seriously. Up to now he has made himself the apostle of the ugly and repulsive. I should hope that the derision of serious people would disgust him with this manner so contrary to art.

(v) Ernest Filloneau in *Le Moniteur des arts*

An epidemic of crazy laughter prevails... in front of the canvasses by Manet... [It is] a subject of general surprise that the jury accepted these works... *Olympia* is a nude, recumbent woman to whom some sort of Negress offers a bouquet voluminously wrapped in paper. At the foot of the bed crouches a black cat, its hair on end, who probably doesn't like flowers since it cuts such a pathetic figure. Moreover, the heroine herself seems indifferent to the homage of the Negress. Is *Olympia* waiting for her bath or for the laundress?

(vi) Léon Lagrange in *Le Correspondant*

After Ribot, must we speak of Manet? No, if it is only to ascertain that this is a group of invalids trying to pass themselves off as incurable. A hospital flirtation! Do they think they can impose themselves on us? They will be cured, one after the other, and Manet himself in spite of his excesses will not die impenitent.

(vii) Ernest Chesneau in *Le Constitutionnel*

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 favour of inconceivable vulgarity... He succeeds in provoking almost scandalous laughter, which causes the Salon visitors to crowd around this ludicrous creature called *Olympia*... In this case, the comedy is caused by the loudly advertised intention of producing a noble work, a pretension thwarted by the absolute impotence of the execution.

(viii) Jules Clarétie in *L'Artiste*

I like audacity and I believe, like Danton, that a good deal is necessary, but yet not too much. Once upon a time there was a young man called Manet who, one fine day, bravely exhibited among the rejected paintings [ie. at the Salon des Refusés] a nude woman lurching with some young men dressed in sack suits and capped with Spanish sombreros. Many cried shame, some smiled, others applauded, all noted the name of

the audacious fellow who already had something and who promised much more. We find him again this year with two dreadful canvasses, 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*? *Olympia*? What *Olympia*? A courtesan no doubt. Manet cannot be accused of idealizing the foolish virgins, he who makes them vulgar virgins. I had promised myself not to speak of it any more.

(ix) Jules Clarétic in *Le Figaro*

During the last few days of the Salon several alterations took place in the arrangement of the paintings. You had seen Manet's *Venus with the Cat* flaunting her wan nudity on the stairs. Public censure chased her from that place of honour. One found the wretched woman again, when one did find her, at a height where even the worst daubs had never been hung, above the huge door of the last room, where you scarcely knew whether you were looking at a parcel of nude flesh or a bundle of laundry.

(x) Théophile Gautier fils in *Le Monde illustré*

In certain circles Manet's paintings have already been extensively discussed. This artist counted a bit on the jury refusing his works; this would have been a fine occasion to exclaim about injustice and prejudice. But nothing like that happened. The jury accepted his paintings and was kind enough to have them hung in one of the best places in the salon, so that everyone could judge the case with full knowledge. The jury ought indeed to have been good enough to ask Manet for a statement of his tendencies which should have been printed as a brochure. Perhaps that would have enlightened public opinion. As it is, the appearance alone of Manet's pictures doesn't sufficiently satisfy the eye and the mind; it doesn't explain the hue and cry that people have tried to stir up about this new school. Perhaps his aesthetic is excellent, but it is really impossible to have any idea of it in actual practice. The *Christ Mocked* beggars description. In *Olympia* Manet seems to have made some concession to public taste. In spite of his prejudices one sees pieces which demand no more than to be thought good.

(xi) Théophile Gautier in *Le Moniteur universel*

With some repugnance I come to the peculiar paintings by Manet. It is awkward to discuss them, but one cannot pass them in silence. . . . In many persons' opinion it would be enough to pass by and laugh; that is a mistake. Manet is not of no account; he has a school, he has admirers and even enthusiasts; his influence extends further than you think. Manet has the distinction of being a danger. But the danger is now passed. *Olympia* can be understood from no point of view, even if you take it for what it is, a puny model stretched out on a sheet. The colour of the flesh is dirty, the modelling non-existent. The shadows are indicated by more or less large smears of blacking. What's to be said for the Negress who brings a bunch of flowers wrapped in a paper, or for the black cat which leaves its dirty footprints on the bed? We would still forgive the ugliness, were it only truthful, carefully studied, heightened by some

splendid effect of colour. The least beautiful woman has bones, muscles, skin, and some sort of colour. Here there is nothing, we are sorry to say, but the desire to attract attention at any price.

(xii) Marc de Montifaud in *L'Artiste*

We can recognize Manet's touch in the midst of the eccentricities he has been pleased to offer us. . . . and this touch denotes a vigour which, used by a healthier imagination, could produce a real work.

(xiii) Anon. in *L'Autographe au Salon de 1865*

He who laughs last laughs best. Manet has fired his shots today, and the wide-open ears of the public have heard his name. Let him just take time, from now on, to clean out and tidy up his pictures, and you will see the public marvelling over this same painting which has so thoroughly frightened it. For Manet has unusual qualities of originality and character as a draughtsman, of subtlety and pungency as a colourist. You can see this even in these little sketches which seem to have been done with the end of a pen, with the flawless casualness and picturesque spirit of Goya.

(xiv) Gonzague Privat in *Place aux jeunes! Causeries critiques sur le Salon de 1865*

Do not be displeased; Manet's *Olympia* is more than something good; solid and painterly qualities predominate in it. The young girl is done in a flat tone, her flesh is of an exquisite delicacy, a nicety, in a perfect relationship with the white draperies. The background is charming, the green curtains which enclose the bed are of a light and airy colour. But the public, the crude public that finds it easier to laugh than to look, understands nothing at all of this art which is too abstract for its intelligence. . . . [*Olympia*] has in it the great seed: life, because it has been conceived and painted by a sincere man.

(xv) Théophile Thoré in *L'Indépendance Belge*

Manet should not want to be taken for an old hack at copy-work. Nevertheless, having had the unfortunate idea of painting a Christ scourged, well enough. But this new work is almost a copy of the famous composition by Van Dyck! A year ago, painting a Spanish subject which he had never seen, he copied the Velasquez in the Pourtalès Collection. . . . Manet's *Olympia* has caused all Paris to run to see this curious woman with her magnificent bouquet, her Negress, and her black cat. Manet's friends defy the author of the Siamese Scarabs [Gérôme] to paint a bouquet so luminous or a cat so weird.

(xvi) Amédée Cantaloube in *Le Grand journal*

This *Olympia*, a sort of female gorilla, a grotesque in India rubber outlined in black, apes on a bed, in a state of complete nudity, the horizontal attitude of Titian's *Venus*: the right arm rests on the body in the same fashion, except for the hand, which is flexed in a sort of shameless contraction.

(xvii) 'Pierrot' in *les Tablettes de Pierrot – Histoire de la Semaine*

... a woman on a bed, or, rather, some form or other, blown up like a grotesque in India rubber; a sort of monkey making fun of the pose and the movement of the arm in Titian's *Venus*, with one hand shamelessly flexed.

(xviii) Victor de Jankovitz in *Etude sur le Salon de 1865*

The author represents for us under the name of Olympia a young girl lying on a bed, having as her only garment a knot of ribbon in her hair, and her hand for fig leaf. The expression of her face is that of being prematurely aged and vicious; her body, of a putrefying colour, recalls the horror of the morgue.

(xix) 'Ego' in *Le Monde Illustré*

The *auguste jeune fille* is a courtesan, with dirty hands and wrinkled feet; she is lying down, wearing one Turkish slipper and with a red cockade in her hair; 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. No, never has anything so... strange been hung on the walls of an art exhibition.

(xx) 'Jean Ravenel' (Alfred Sensier) in *L'Epoque*

MONSIEUR MANET – *Olympia* – The scapegoat of the salon, the victim of Parisian Lynch law. Each passer-by takes a stone and throws it at her face. *Olympia* is a very crazy piece of Spanish madness, which is a thousand times better than the platitude and inertia of so many canvases on show in the exhibition.

Armed insurrection in the camp of the bourgeois: it is a glass of iced water which each visitor gets full in the face when he sees the BEAUTIFUL *courtisane* in full bloom.

Painting of the school of Baudelaire, freely executed by a pupil of Goya; the vicious strangeness of the little *faubourienne*, a woman of the night from Paul Niquet's, from the mysteries of Paris and the nightmares of Edgar Poe. Her look has the sourness of someone prematurely aged, her face the disturbing perfume of a *fleur du mal*; her body fatigued, corrupted, but painted under a single, transparent light, with the shadows light and fine, the bed and pillows put down in a velvet, modulated grey. Negress and flowers insufficient in execution, but with a real harmony to them, the shoulder and arm solidly established in a clean and pure light. – The cat arching its back makes the visitor laugh and relax; it is what saves M. Manet from a popular execution.

De sa fourrure noire et brune  
Sort un parfum si doux, qu'un soir  
J'en fus embaumé pour l'avoir  
Caressé une fois... rien qu'une.

(From its fur black and brown/ Comes a perfume so soft, that one evening/ I was embalmed in it for having/ Caressed it once... only once.)

C'est l'esprit familier du lieu;  
Il juge, il préside, il inspire  
Toutes choses dans son empire;  
Peut-être est-il fée, est-il dieu?

(It is the familiar spirit of the place;/ It judges, it presides, it inspires/ All things in its empire;/ Perhaps it is a sprite, is it a god?)

Monsieur Manet, instead of Monsieur Astruc's verses, would perhaps have done well to take as epigraph the quatrain devoted to Goya by the most *advanced* painter of our epoch:

GOYA – Cauchemar plein de choses inconnues,  
De foetus qu'on fait cuire au milieu des sabbats,  
De vieilles au miroir et d'enfants toutes nues  
Pour tenter les démons ajustant bien leurs bas.

(Goya – Nightmare full of unknown things/ Of a foetus cooked in the middle of a sabbath/ Of old women at a mirror and naked girls/ Straightening their stockings to tempt demons)

Perhaps this *olla podrida de toutes les Castilles* is not flattering for Monsieur Manet, but all the same it is something. One does not make an *Olympia* simply by wanting to. – The *Christ* would call for a certain technical analysis which we do not have time to give. – To summarize, it is hideous, but all the same it is something. A painter is in evidence, and the strange group is bathed in light.

## 13 Edouard Manet (1832–1883) 'Reasons for Holding a Private Exhibition'

The Salon jury of 1866 rejected both Manet's *Fifer* and his *Tragic Actor*. The next year he was apparently ignored when a large exhibition of French art was being prepared for the Paris World's Fair. Following Courbet's precedent he took matters into his own hands and mounted a private exhibition of fifty of his works in a specially erected wooden building at the Pont de l'Alma, near the exhibition site. The following statement was printed as a foreword to the catalogue. Its message, like that of Courbet's statement of 1855, was that it was merely the artist's individuality that had aroused hostile reactions to his work, and that if the members of the public could only be allowed to judge for themselves they would be persuaded of his sincerity. In fact the venture attracted no significant attention from the public or the press. The statement was subsequently published in Jacques de Biez, *Edouard Manet*, Paris, 1884, and was reprinted in Pierre Cailler and Pierre Courthion (eds), *Manet raconté par lui-même et par ses amis*, Geneva, 1953. This translation by Michael Ross is taken from the English version of the latter publication, *Portrait of Manet by Himself and His Contemporaries*, London: Cassell, 1960, pp. 60–1. The ellipsis is in the original.

Monsieur Manet has been exhibiting or trying to exhibit his pictures since 1861.

This year he has decided to present to the public the whole of his work.