

The Manet Exhibit: Spiritual Perspectives

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Recently, I had the opportunity to view a major exhibition of 62 portraits and genre scenes by Edouard Manet (1832 – 1883), commonly considered a pioneer of modern painting. The exhibit was organized in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Arts in London and was shown in the United States only at the highly regarded Toledo Museum of Art. A friend, who is a Museum docent, guided me through the exhibit, providing background information, indicating wall texts to read and pointing out the more significant paintings by the man known as the father of French Impressionism. The exhibit provided an opportunity to encounter the world of Paris in the second half of the 19th century as seen through the eyes of an artist committed to manifesting the truth of that world. After enjoying the exhibit, I continued to reflect on his work with the help of the exhibition book *Manet: Portraying Life* and an extended conversation with an expert on 19th century European art who had also seen the exhibit.

Edouard Manet grew up in an affluent Parisian family, the son of a French judge who expected him to pursue a career in law. An uncle, however, took him to the Louvre at a young age, spawning an interest in the world of art, especially painting. Starting in 1850, at the age of 18, he studied for six years under the painter Thomas Couture. In 1856, Edouard opened his own studio, launching a 27 year career that made him one of the most influential artists in all Europe. Early in his career he painted a couple of explicitly religious paintings, including *Christ Mocked*, that portrays a very vulnerable Jesus surrounded by three torturers who look more ambivalent than cruel in carrying out their vicious attack on an innocent man. The fact that Manet created no more explicitly religious paintings says more about the reduced role of the church as patron of the arts than about Manet's own religious sensibilities.

Throughout the rest of his career his subject matter was taken from ordinary life: a couple in a café engaging in intimate conversation, two women enjoying a game of croquet, his wife playing the piano. His hundreds of portraits included some well-known figures like the writer Emile Zola and many of his wife and friends, as well as individuals of the lower classes. Most years, beginning in 1859, Manet submitted one or more paintings to the annual Salon in Paris,

the most prestigious art exhibit in all Europe. Some of his submissions, including *The Absinthe Drinker* (1859) and *The Artist* (1873), were rejected by the Salon judges, usually for flouting established norms. Others, such as *The Luncheon* (1868) and *The Railway* (1873), were accepted, spreading his fame throughout Europe and the world. His new creative approaches encouraged younger Parisian artists, including Claude Monet and Pierre August Renoir, to establish a new movement, known as Impressionism, that concentrated on ordinary subject matter with attention to the way changing natural light influenced the scene. Manet did not join the Impressionists in their independent exhibitions, but did encourage them and their movement. Throughout his career, Manet remained interested in portraiture with special attention to women of all social classes. Despite ill health in his last years, he created some striking pastel portraits of women attired in contemporary fashions suggestive of Parisian culture. He died prematurely in 1883 at the age of 51.

Religiously, Manet was a Catholic by birth, baptism and regular participation in Sunday Mass. He no doubt knew well the great churches of Paris, including the magnificent Cathedral of Notre Dame with its soaring Gothic arches, Sainte-Chapelle with its vibrant stained-glass windows, and Sainte-Sulpice with its wall paintings by Eugene Delacroix, who influenced the younger Manet. Politically, he espoused the democratic and egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution and opposed the authoritarian rule of Napoleon III, who had himself crowned as Emperor of the French shortly after his election as president of the Second French Republic in 1846. Culturally, Manet was thoroughly immersed in the life of his beloved Paris, one of the world's great centers of learning, art and fashion. He and his wife Suzanne hosted soirees twice a week in their home where artists, politicians and scholars engaged in serious discussions. A gregarious man, Manet frequented the cafes of Paris where he socialized with friends, including well-known individuals like the poet Charles Baudelaire, who encouraged Edouard to capture the fleeting experience of modern Paris. As a Parisian, Manet had easy access to the Louvre, one of the world's great art museums, where he personally viewed and copied great masterpieces, such as the Hellenistic sculpture *Venus de Milo*, de Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Rembrandt's *The Supper at Emmaus* and Titian's *The Crowning with Thorns*. Manet's Paris was not only an outstanding cultural center, but also home to modern technology, including the steam locomotive that ran throughout the city as early as 1852, and the photographic camera that made it possible to produce permanent images of individuals and groups, thus creating new challenges for portrait artists like Manet.

As an artist, Manet was passionate about portraying ordinary Parisian life in its deepest truth. He was highly critical of the traditional artistic approaches of his time that involved “frills” and “artistic tricks.” He criticized a particular artist who accurately painted a man’s frocked coat, but left us with a subject who is “not breathing under his clothing.” Manet railed against his culture’s “obsession with symmetry,” noting that “there is no symmetry in nature. One eye is never the same as the other and we all have a nose that is more or less crooked.”

Although Manet’s creative efforts to express the truth of ordinary life in new ways drew fire from some establishment critics, many other commentators recognized his creative genius, including his innate ability to “understand the human countenance” and to produce portraits that reveal “the physical and moral counterpart of an individual.” He was able “to envelope his characters with the atmosphere of the world to which they belong,” according to one critic quoted in the exhibition book. The large crowds that visited the Manet exhibit at the Toledo Museum of Art suggest that history has sided more with Manet’s admirers than his critics.

The effort to pass over to the world of great artists enables us to return to our own world with renewed attention and deeper insights. My own perception, informed by Catholic theology and practice, is that Manet had a profound spiritual vision of human existence that saw the infinite in the finite, meaning in the ordinary things of life, and divine light shining in everyday activities. Manet would resonate, it seems to me, with the vision of his contemporary, the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who envisioned a “world charged with the grandeur of God.” Manet helped expand the subject matter for painting from mythological and religious figures to ordinary people engaged in everyday activities. He recognized a proper “liturgy of the world,” as the theologian Karl Rahner would later put it. It seems Manet manifested intuitively what contemporary theology calls an incarnational or sacramental sensibility, alert to the immanent presence of the divine in all human flesh and aware that the whole of visible reality reflects the presence of invisible Mystery.

This sacramental sensibility is at work in Manet’s portrait of his friend and biographer Antonin Proust (1880), a writer, art critic, and, for a brief period, Minister of Fine Arts. The catalogue describes the three-quarter length portrait of Proust, who is wearing a frock coat and a top hat and is “jauntily looking directly at the viewer” as a “dashing” depiction, “a compelling image of self-assurance,” and an integral portrayal of an individual in his “physical, social and

psychological” being. Manet has given us not a representative figure or stereotypical model, but a unique individual with his own distinctive face, soul and social position. The portrait reminds me of the memorable statement of the early Christian theologian Irenaeus of Lyons (d 202): “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” God calls each one of us by name, bestowing on us distinctive gifts and talents and summoning us to develop them so we can be fully alive integrated persons. The truth of Manet’s *Proust* accords with the Christian teaching that our essential worth and dignity is based finally not on being better than others, but on being our better selves embraced in all our strengths and limitations by a loving God.

The portrait of the writer and political activist Emile Zola, an 1868 selection by the Salon, deals with a man and his work. Zola is seated in his study, an open book in his hand, writing instruments nearby, and books on the back of the writing table. Manet’s own interests are represented as well: for example, the print of a Sumo wrestler in the background indicates his interest in Japanese art. The focus of the painting, however, is on Zola and his work as a writer. Manet’s treatment indicates to me that Zola’s work is very important to him, but does not ultimately define him. Sitting in a rather erect posture at his desk, he is not looking directly at the book in his hand but away from it, suggesting a certain psychic distance from his work. He is more than a writer; he is a person who writes. Americans today with workaholic tendencies would do well to meditate on the Zola portrait, as would those who find their self-worth totally tied to work achievements. More positively, Manet reminds us that there is a proper spirituality of work rooted in an incarnational sensibility. Through our work we develop our personality and character. Tedious toil teaches us discipline and perseverance. Challenging tasks call forth creativity and personal development. Work keeps us grounded in reality and often tutors us in teamwork and collaboration. From a Christian perspective, as enunciated by the French religious visionary Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), our daily work enriches the divine milieu and pushes the evolutionary process forward toward a final fulfillment. In tune with Teilhard, we can say that God can be found in the factory, the classroom, the kitchen, the office, and the laboratory, as well as the scholar’s study. Wherever human beings are engaged in legitimate work they are co-creating with God our evolving world.

The Manet exhibit included a number of scenes of the leisurely life of his fellow Parisians, including *Music in the Tuileries Garden* (1862), showing an elegant crowd enjoying the music played twice weekly in the gardens attached to

Napoleon's palace, and *A Game of Croquet* (1872), depicting two women fashionably attired playing croquet in a garden. It seems Manet was interested in the meaning and role of leisure in his world with its expanded opportunities for recreational activities. We Americans today continue to wrestle with the proper role of leisure in our work oriented, success-driven culture. Television can be entertaining and informative, but often is unhealthy physically and spiritually. Vacations can be relaxing, but frequently turn into frenzied extensions of work that are more enervating than energizing. Sports can be healthy physically and spiritually, but are threatened at all levels by a win at all cost mentality. In his 1948 classic work, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, the German philosopher Josef Pieper (1904-1997) warned that our modern work-oriented society deadens the human spirit and diminishes culture. Drawing on Aristotle and the Christian tradition, he went on to emphasize the importance of genuine leisure for an integrated human life and a healthy culture. Following his lead, we need a fundamental attitude change which values practices that renew our spirit, refresh our souls, energize our bodies, prompt reflection and lead to worship. Reflecting his spiritual intuitions, Manet's scenes of leisure portray simple activities with an intrinsic power to tap divine energy and renew the human spirit.

As we search for genuine leisure in our busy world, we might take our clue from Manet and find simpler leisure activities that truly lift our spirits: for example, take a walk in nature with special attention to the beauty of God's creation; enjoy a family picnic with all mobile devices turned off; watch a kid's game without criticizing coaches, referees or players; participate in Sunday worship without wearing a watch; visit a museum, leisurely exploring the world of a particular artist, and then return home to reflect on what the experience means for life today.