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FAH 92-05: Introduction to Modern Art
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Final Assignment

Mirror, Femininity, and Sexuality in Modern Art

Mirror has long been a common iconography in western art. In the majority of time in the history however, it had been an object enjoyed exclusively by the aristocracy, used sparingly in dressing rooms and other private realms (Lucy 2018, 267). The private nature and function of mirror inevitably associate mirror with beauty, fashion, female body, and some elements of voyeurism among other things. It wasn't until early to mid 19th century did we have the technology to mass produce mirrors and thereafter mirrors soon became a new hallmark of modern life starting to appear on every wall of new popular recreational venues frequented by the new bourgeoisie Parisians like cafes, bars, department stores, opera house, and even in outdoor space. Therefore, it does not come to a surprise for us that mirror became a common subject in modern art paintings, especially those focused on the bourgeoisie lifestyle in the late 19th century. German philosopher Walter Benjamin identified mirror as one of the defining aspects of life in Paris along with prostitution and fashion, and even went so far to describe Paris as the "city of mirrors" (Lucy 2018, 267). The rising availability of mirror had also allowed it to become a common household object, and therefore an ever more common prop used when painting female subjects especially in an intimate domestic setting. The theme of woman before the mirror often carries a certain degree of voyeurism. The existence of mirror allows viewers to see the subject from even more angles. On the one hand, it allows the viewers to appreciate the beauty of the subject more thoroughly; on the other hand, it facilitates the process of further objectifying the subject, as we keep in mind that most paintings at the time were catered to heterosexual male perspective. The theme of linking mirror and woman persisted in later modern

art, especially in the realm of surrealism, as Fer suggested, “feminine was surrealism’s central organizing metaphor of difference” (Fer 1993, 171). Concerning themselves with “place of madness” and unconscious as well as its relation to sexuality and desire, surrealist artists brought women to the center of their focus as they believed that women inherently were closer to men to unconscious and were the symbol of desire (Fer 1993, 176-179).

In this exhibition, I have included works from Morisot, Degas, Manet, Cassatt, Picasso, Pollock, Man Ray, and Oppenheim. Each of the painting or photograph involves a female subject as well as a mirror. The relationship between the subject and mirror varies in these paintings. For example, in Manet’s *Before the Mirror* (1876), mirror in the background serves as a reminder for us the intimate setting we are put in. In Degas’ *Mrs Jeantaud in the Mirror* (1875), the reflection in the mirror serves an important function showing us the face and front body of Mrs. Jeantaud. In Cassatt’s *Women with a Pearl Necklace in la Loge* (1879), mirror anchors us to the grand Parisian opera house and where we are in relation to our female subject and other audiences as well as their relationship. The function of the mirror is supposed to reflect the objective truth but what we see in the mirror is always subjectively influenced by our mind and our own perception of self which is influenced and shaped by many things around us. Such a notion was explored in Picasso’s *Girl before mirror* (1932) as he presented the duality of the reality and mirroring image through his female subject. The exhibition also includes an object made by surrealist artist Meret Oppenheim named *Miss Gardenia* (1962) which is a full combination of mirror and femininity in its totality suggesting beauty and femininity as an inseparable nature of the mirror object. Through the selection of works, the exhibition aims to explore female sexuality and femininity through the use of mirror in modern art.

Object List

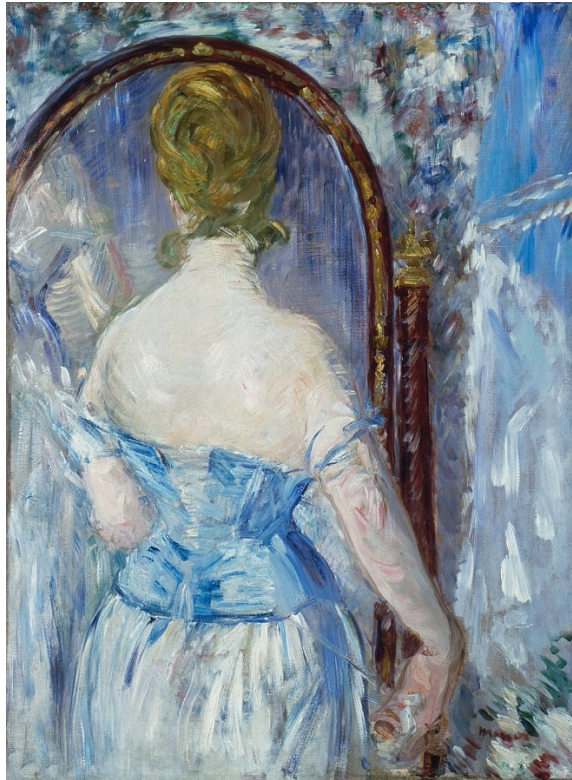
Berthe Morisot. *The Psyche Mirror*. 1876



Edgar Degas. *Mrs Jeantaud in the Mirror*. 1875



Édouard Manet. *Before the Mirror*. 1865



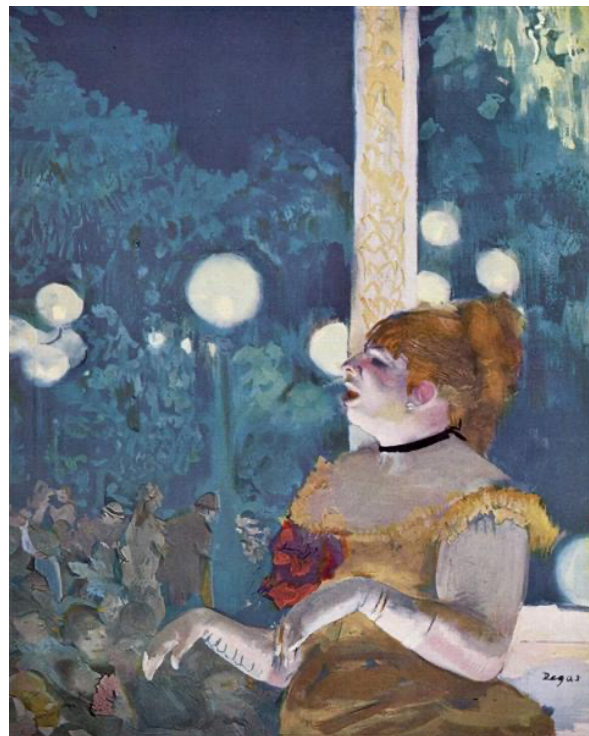
Mary Cassatt. *Women with a pearl necklace in la loge*. 1879



Édouard Manet. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. 1882



Edgar Degas. *Café-concert: The Song of the Dog*. 1875-77



Pablo Picasso. *Girl Before Mirror*. 1932



Pablo Picasso. *Women at their toilette*. 1938



Man Ray. *Nusch Eluard with Mirror*. 1935



Meret Oppenheim. *Miss Gardenia*. 1962



Berthe Morisot. *The Psyche Mirror*. 1876

Morisot brought us to the domestic sphere with a young lady, probably of bourgeoisie class suggested by the furniture and her attire, contemplating in front of a full-length mirror. With a heavy brush stroke, the painting seems as if it is put behind the veil as everything appears blurring from the viewer's perspective. She appears to be wearing a white chemise and a pair of golden heeled slipper with a black choker necklace. The left shoulder of her dress has slipped down, and she seems to be tying her dress with both of her hands on the back. It is a very intimate moment of a young woman's daily life except that it has been captured by Morisot. The vagueness of the painting and the intimacy level of the moment makes viewers feel somewhat uncomfortable because we are put in the position to be actively infringing on the privacy of the young lady as we try to figure out what is going on. Especially with her head tilted, and her body posture soft yet natural, she does not seem to be aware of the gaze focusing on her. In comparison, if you look at either Manet's *Before the Mirror* or Degas' *Mrs Jeantaud in the Mirror*, both subjects are noticeably aware of the gaze looking at them -- Mrs Jeantaud is directly engaging with the audience through the mirror while the posture of Manet's subject appears stiff and almost exhibitionistic. Without addressing viewer's gaze, the young lady in Morisot's painting seems comfortable and relaxed in the space of her own with her thoughts and activity uninterrupted by the viewers. Such a difference between works of female and male impressionist artists is what Pollock called as "re-articulation of traditional space" through which femininity is "re-worked" (Pollock 1988, 87). Under such new framework, the subject ceases to become objectified by the viewer/artists and exists for their own activity and thoughts.

Édouard Manet. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. 1882

The composition of the painting is straightforward yet baffling due to the use of mirror in the background. The setting at the table in front of us and the reflection from the mirror tell us that the scene took place in a café or bar in Paris where café and bar culture became one of the hall marks of modern life. The expansiveness of the mirror and the glass chandelier depicted in the background registered the social transformation as well as the sheer opulence of Paris at the time. If not looking closely, one could almost be deceived by the background as there are no indication of it being a mirror other than the reflection of the bartender's back and customer towards the right edge of the painting, an arrangement that is optically impossible and untrue in real life. In place of the space where viewers occupy, there is a middle age bourgeoisie man who Baudelaire would probably consider as a *flâneur*. The bartender is looking straight into us/him in a baffling look, which seems passive-aggressive yet empty and meaningless as if she is just looking at a blank spot while her mind wonders somewhere else. To put her position into context, it was at a time when respectable bourgeoisie women were effectively denied the right to enjoy public venues without compromising their femininity as it was considered to be an exchange market for female sexuality/body (Pollock 1988, 78). Working class women like the bartender in the painting were "often suspected of touting for custom as clandestine prostitution" (Pollock 1988, 74). Her extremely slender waist and a full chest might be an insinuation of this positionality, at least under the male gaze as Manet portrayed. Therefore, not only her stare appears comparable to the stare of the prostitute in Manet's *Olympia* (1863), her positionality in reality is also comparable to that of Olympia under the gaze of us, a bourgeoisie heterosexual *flâneur*/male artist of the late 19th century in Paris. Additionally, Manet emphasized the presence of women in the café through the reflection of the mirror, highlighting the powdered face of three women scattered at the left side of the painting, especially the woman in white, while

obscuring the face of men. Such a representation again reinforces the positionality of women as a whole in the setting of café-concert as an object of the male's gaze and as Pollock (1988) suggested "women did not enjoy the freedom of incognito in the crowd" (71).

Mary Cassatt. *Women with a pearl necklace in la loge*. 1879

Sitting in the middle is a fashionable bourgeoisie woman in the Paris Opera house inside of a private lounge. Casually leaning towards one side against the chair, her eyes are looking outward and her appearance gives out a sense of confidence and freedom. Like Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, mirror in this painting is semi-hidden and is used to set forth the environment in which the subject is in. Another similarity is perhaps the intentional optical "mistake" of the depiction of what would have been reflected in the mirror. It is, in fact, very hard for us to figure out where was Cassatt's position in relation to the subject. If she were sitting across her, the mirror in front of her should have reflected her own image which is nowhere to be found. The reflection of balconies make it appears that they are straight in front of her, which is also quite impossible to think of. Despite being a bourgeois woman in a private lounge, it is still a public space where she can be seen and subject to other's gaze. Her outward looking eyes suggest that she herself is also observing others while perhaps aware that someone could be staring at her at the same time. She seems like a character who walked out from Baudelaire's description of the Parisian scene of the "young woman of the most fashionable society" who sits in their own box with jewelry and "snowy white shoulder...Some flaunt their bosom with an aristocratic unconcern, other frankly display the chest of young boys. They tap their teeth with their fans, while their gaze is vacant or set" and pretending to be following the play or opera (Baudelaire 1964, 34-35). Mary Cassatt, however, managed to take a less sexualized approach than that of

Baudelaire. The young woman is not looking back into us, an act that is not acknowledging the gaze nor confirming the “viewer’s right to look and appraise”, a subtle subversion of the young fashionable lady enjoying the Parisian night life (Pollock 1988, 75).

Picasso. *Girl Before Mirror*. 1932

A young beautiful woman is placed under the spotlight with a large mirror in front of her, creating a full reflection of her upper body. Picasso took this old theme in art of woman and mirror and added his own twist with his unique representation of the bodily form and the various layers of duality given to the figure and the reflection. The color outside the mirror is brighter than that of in the mirror with red and yellow patterned square in the background and the light pink flesh used to paint the woman’s body. Half of her face is yellow with a large orange mark on her cheek, blending into the yellow patterned background. Her body is also divided into two parts, with the front side facing the mirror being mostly pink with black shadow, and the back side being pale green with black strips. There is a baffling continuity and merging of the image within the mirror and the figure outside of the mirror. For example, if you look at her arm, half of which seems to be the reflection with darker pink while the other half with paler pink appears to belong to the actual body outside of the mirror.

Through the reflection of the mirror, Picasso seemed to be exploring the inner world of the woman who were looking into the mirror at herself and depicting what he imaged as what she saw in her mind, a quintessential surrealist quality which Fer (1993) described as “looking beyond mere appearances and understanding that beneath these lay a range of psychic and social forces over which individuals have little or no control” (180). The bleaker outlook of the reflection might be a projection of her own dissatisfaction or simply another side of her hiding

under her bright appearance. Placing the two images side by side places emphasis on the contrast between them and duality of the painting. In contrast to Manet's *Before the Mirror*, where the image in the mirror was intentionally blurred away, Picasso had given the woman of his subject the ability to think, to look in the mirror not just as a narcissist approach to admire the exterior beauty, but to confront perhaps the uglier side of herself or her fear.

Meret Oppenheim. *Miss Gardenia*. 1962

The object takes the shape of a mirror with a golden metal frame of intricate baroque style floral design inspired by the gardenia, a type of flower that is known for its strong pleasant smell and is commonly used as an ingredient in perfume. The frame is carved with such delicacy that one would not be surprised to see on the dressing table of a 18th century aristocrat woman. In place of the reflecting surface is a piece of plastic of smooth surface with a bump in the middle. The combination of metal and plastic, by taking the mirror form yet without its actual functionality is a characteristic of surrealism, “the desire to shock, to confuse normal expectation” (Fer 1993, 176). The delicate floral design is feminine in nature and while in contrast, the plastic has an extremely simple design which somehow seems highly erotic, feminine, and enigmatic as it really could be anything, a nose on the face, the shoulder blade of the “snowy white shoulder” in Baudelaire’s eyes, or even a pubic bone. The strange and vague representation of it again steams from surrealist’s desire to express the unconscious, the “indeterminacy of image” of the dream narrative (Fer 1993, 193).

Mirror provides reflection of the world and is often associated with beauty especially that of woman in the history of art. While mirror itself as an object can persist through time serving one owner and another, the beauty that it reflects is transient and changing every second with

time. Oppenheimer used the white plastic to capture that moment of beauty and makes it eternal alongside with the mirror frame. The ambiguity and uncanniness of the surface only adds the charm to it and leave the viewers the room to fill in their own imagination and interpretation.

Works Cited

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