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ENGL 1010-910

18 September 2025

Confronting the Gaze

Describing a work of art without using bland, overused language raises a tough challenge, as art often uses mediums and subjects that provoke what an analysis would call “colorless commentary.” However, Édouard Monet’s *Olympia* (c. 1862-1863) is an exception. *Olympia* shows the viewer a controversial projection of subjects with contrasting colors and models, all of which disrupted the 19th-century views surrounding gender, race, and class. Although *Olympia* appalled its intended audience, its importance lies within the fact that its disruption of tradition was deliberate; Manet used images that portrayed visibility and power, not something typical for its time. *Olympia* redefined the societal views of the “female nude” by setting a contemporary woman in a vulnerable pose, while foregrounding race, class, and gender tensions with the inclusion of Laure (aka “the Black maid”) making the painting a commentary on modernity and visibility.

Édouard Monet was one of the most important figures in the switch from Realism to Impressionism. Born in 1832 in Paris, Monet rejected the artistic customs of his time; he sought to depict modern life in its most natural form. *Olympia*, exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1865, was inspired by Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, but didn’t include its mythological and romantic themes. Instead of a goddess, Monet presented a modern woman – potentially a sex worker – who stares at the viewer with an unwavering, almost distasteful gaze. Critics condemned *Olympia’s* indecency and the “unsettling” presence of Laure. However, this reaction underlines *Olympia’s* purpose of forcing viewers to face their assumptions about femininity, morality, and racial hierarchy.

The composition of *Olympia* is simple: a nude woman, shown with an orchid in her hair and a bracelet on her arm, with a black cat at the foot of the bed, and what is perceived as a Black maid at her side. Her posture is relaxed yet rigid, with an almost unreadable, direct look on her face. Rather than being coy or inviting, she is seen as being present and aware. Behind the bed stands Laure, a Black maid holding a bouquet of flowers. The contrast in tones between Olympia and Laure’s skin renders Laure almost invisible, yet Laure is painted with remarkable detail and dignity. As Denise Murrell notes in her article, “Rediscovering the Black Muses Erased from Art History,” Laure is not just a servant, but a named individual who modeled for multiple artists in 19th-century Paris. Her inclusion forces the viewer to consider the racial dynamic, not just in the painting, but in the society that produced it (Murrell).

Manet’s use of color theory and visual technique further solidifies *Olympia’s* modernity. The background being flat and dark pushes the figures of Olympia and Laure forward. The viewers’ eyes are first drawn to Olympia’s body, outlined with very sharp, defined lines, which rejected the societal idea of the feminine nude being soft and vulnerable. The next subject presented to the viewer is the white bouquet of flowers, held by Laure. Additionally, the black cat at Olympia’s feet differs from the usual “dog of fidelity,” which adds a note of obscurity, possibly symbolizing defiance or independence. And finally, the viewer’s eyes land on Laure, almost blending into the background, and yet more visible and defined than Olympia herself. Sister Wendy Beckett, in her analysis of the painting, mentioned that Olympia “refuses to be possessed” and that her gaze is “not seductive, but challenging” (*Sister Wendy on Manet’s Olympia*). This refusal to be within the viewers' expectations is crucial to the painting's impact.

Laure being in the painting expands the visual narrative of *Olympia*. In most 19th-century artwork, Black subjects were backgrounded, unnamed, and invisible. In Olympia, Laure is none of those things; she is depicted as one of the main subjects, her gaze directed at Olympia instead of the viewer. Murrell argues that the positioning made society reconsider their thoughts and ideas about Black visibility in Western and modern art, noting that Laure’s role “complicates the radical and social hierarchies embedded in the paintings” (Murrell). Her presence breaks the segregation of subject and servant, presenting a shared experience of oppression and empowerment.

*Olympia* is a historical landmark because it challenges the societal ideas of art history, social norms, and the politics of representation. It does not depict the standard provocative nude figure; it is a visual platform of modernity. By showing a woman who controls her own look and a visible Black maid, Manet invites the viewer to face unpleasant truths. The painting inspires arguments about agency, race, and gender, all of which continue to be conversation-starters and sites of analysis today. As said by Sister Wendy, “[Olympia] is not there for our admiration. She is there to challenge us. She refuses to be possessed” (*Sister Wendy on Manet’s Olympia*). This underscores how *Olympia* resists objectification, compelling the viewer to confront their autonomy rather than consume her image.

Manet's Olympia is historic in the history of art, not for the popular outrage, but because it redefined what a painting could make one feel. It prompted one to really see the women that it was portraying; it prompted one to rethink how they viewed the representation of the nude and the inclusion of a Black model. Through its composition, symbolism, and historical context, *Olympia* demonstrated a layered story of visibility, power, and resistance. By recognizing Laure and Olympia as important figures, viewers can understand how Manet’s work anticipated the representation and complexities that still challenge us today.

Works Cited

Thackara, Tess. “The Black Model in Western Art History | Artsy.” *Artsy*, 2018, [www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-rediscovering-black-muses-erased-art-history](http://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-rediscovering-black-muses-erased-art-history).

“Sister Wendy on Manet’s Olympia.” *YouTube*, uploaded by The National Gallery, 26 Mar. 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXicqeiEf6E>.