

Manet's Woman with a Parrot of 1866

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IN THE *Woman with a Parrot of 1866* (Figure 1), Manet's model, Victorine Meurent, emerges from the background holding the cord of a monocle in her left hand and a bunch of violets in her right.¹ She stares straight ahead with a fixed gaze matched in intensity by that of the parrot at her side. Manet unites the composition through careful use of color; the gray of the background reappears both in the folds of the pink dressing gown and, subtly modulated, in the bird's plumage.

According to Emile Zola: "Manet would not know how to sing or to philosophize. He has the gift to capture dominant tones in their delicacy."² Although Zola had the perspicacity to appreciate Manet's excellence as a so-called pure painter—so clearly revealed in the handling of this work—he dismissed the importance of subject matter in Manet's oeuvre.

Zola's approach was adopted by the art critics of the 1860s, who, even while critical of the painting, focused on its formal qualities. Gautier wrote in 1868: "but when in a painting there is neither composition, nor drama, nor poetry, the technique must be perfect. And here this is not the case. . . . The head he shows us is certainly not flattering. Over commonplace and poorly drawn features he spreads an earthy color which does not represent the flesh tint of a young woman's fair complexion."³ Manet's art, leaving aside the question

of quality, is more than an arrangement of tones but exhibits a complex iconography based on works of older art. This is the case with several paintings of the 1860s. It is well known, for example, that Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* was inspired both by Raphael's *Judgment of Paris* and Giorgione's *Fête Champêtre*, his *Old Musician* alludes to the *Drinkers* by Velazquez, and the *Olympia* is based on Titian's *Venus of Urbino*.

Manet combines this knowledge of older art with an interest in specifically contemporary themes. The *Olympia* is one example of this (Figure 2). Theodore Reff points out that in spite of her dependence on Titian's *Venus* she is without doubt a Parisian of the 1860s.⁴ By carefully altering aspects of the painting, Manet changes Titian's languid *Venus* into a haughty, self-assured courtesan of the mid-nineteenth century. He replaces the dog, a traditional symbol of fidelity, with an alley cat—in Manet's circle, an animal associated with promiscuity. In fact, Manet illustrated the chapter on cats' sexual habits in Champfleury's monograph on cats. In the *Olympia* Victorine stares straight ahead proudly as her maid brings in a large bouquet, both a gift from an admirer and a tribute to her power. It was, in fact, during the Second Empire that the courtesan attained a greater position of wealth and influence in Parisian society.⁵ Hence, in the *Olympia*, Manet has subtly woven together aspects of older art and contem-

1. I thank Professor Theodore Reff for specific references as well as for general guidance on this study.

2. Emile Zola, *Salons* (Paris, 1959) p. 92.

3. George Heard Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics* (New Haven, 1954) pp. 119–120.

4. Theodore Reff, "The Meaning of Manet's *Olympia*," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 63 (1964) p. 121. This article presents a thorough discussion of the iconography of the *Olympia*.

5. Reff, "Olympia," p. 121.



FIGURE 1

Woman with a Parrot, by Edouard Manet. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Erwin Davis, 89.21.3

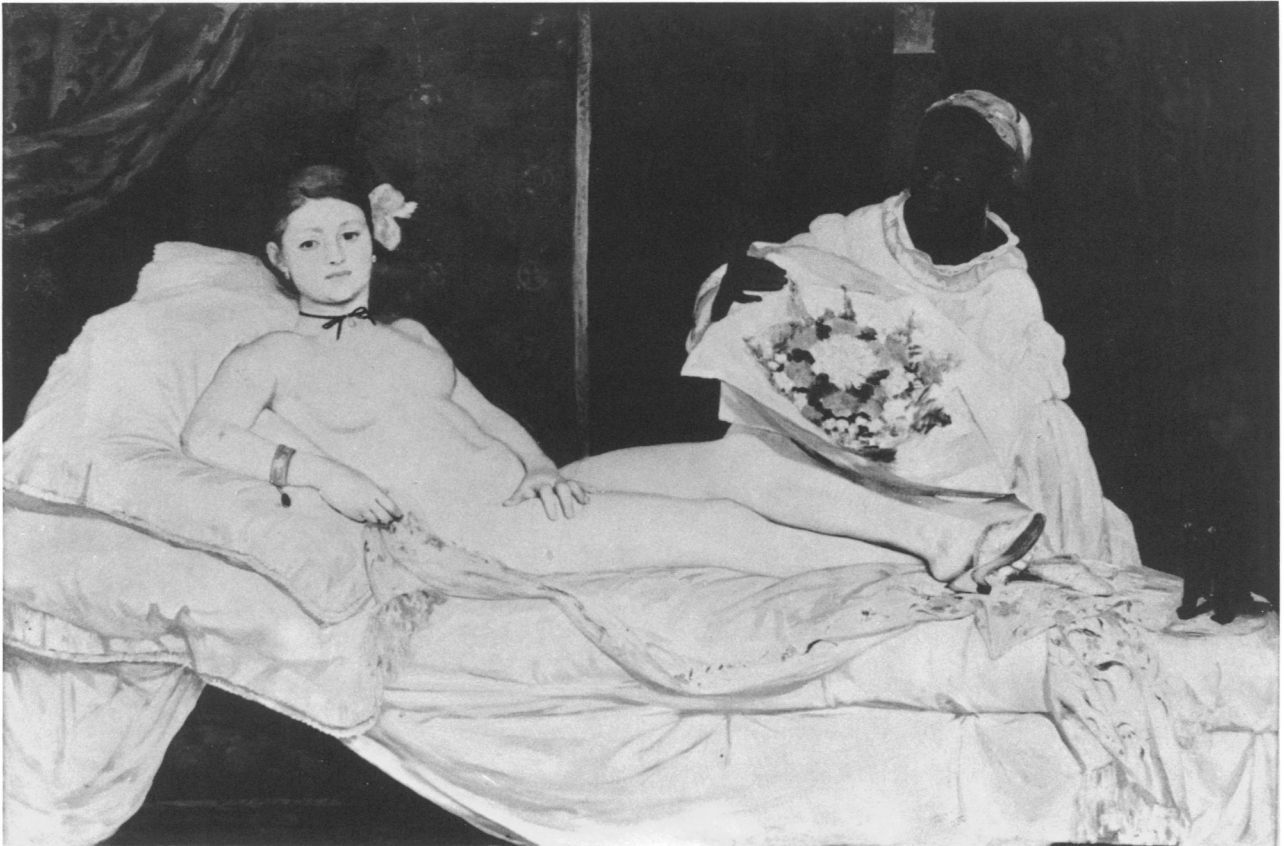
porary symbolism to create a powerful representation of a courtesan during the Second Empire.

The *Woman with a Parrot* was completed only a year after Manet exhibited the *Olympia* and has certain similarities in content and approach. In both, his model Victorine is associated with flowers and a pet animal. Although in the *Woman with a Parrot* Victorine is not a courtesan, but a lady wearing a dressing gown, and her pet is not a cat, but a parrot, there is in this painting, as in the *Olympia*, a broader significance based on both traditional and mid-nineteenth-century concepts.

Of foremost importance in this painting is the relationship of the woman and the parrot. Manet emphasizes the connection between Victorine and her pet through their physiognomic similarity. He tilts her head to the side to show the full view of her left eye. The shadow under this eye is darkened and extended to meet the elongated eyebrow, creating a pictorial shape analogous to the eye of the bird. This formal similarity immediately suggests a relationship between the two on a fundamental level. This is not a unique occurrence in Manet's oeuvre. One year later in his *Portrait of Zola*, Manet included a photograph of

FIGURE 2

Olympia, by Edouard Manet. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Jeu de Paume (photo: Musées Nationaux)



Olympia to the right of Zola. As a tribute to the critic Manet turns Olympia's eyes toward Zola, thereby connecting the author with the subject of his writings.⁶

During the nineteenth century parrots were esteemed for their intelligence and anthropomorphic qualities. In France they were common pets, prized above all, according to the *Larousse*—a basic source on nineteenth-century customs and ideas—for their ability to imitate the human voice.⁷ Rather than using the traditional green bird here, Manet has specifically depicted the ash-colored, red-tailed parrot called the Jaco. This type, indigenous to Africa, was most appreciated by Europeans because it had, “to the highest degree the qualities that characterize parrots.”⁸ In a scientific study of parrots published in 1836, the Jaco is described as “remarkable for its docility and mimicry, the faculty it possesses of imitating the human voice. . . . it surpasses the rest of its species, on which account it has always been held in high estimation by the bird fancier”⁹ An article from the 1834 volume of *Le Magasin Pittoresque*, a popular French periodical, not only mentions the Jaco as the parrot who speaks most fluently,¹⁰ but considers parrots to be the most intelligent of birds and consequently the most suitable companions for people.¹¹ Some believed so strongly in the mental facility of parrots that they consulted parrots on their affairs, even having them select lottery numbers. The article goes on to state, “The reputation of parrots is so well established that it is not even necessary

for them to speak in order for us to suppose that they have ideas and feelings analogous to ours.”¹² The verbal ability of parrots has long been recognized. In fact, they have been traditionally considered a symbol of eloquence.¹³

As for the specific relationship between women and parrots, examples in literature and art can be traced back for centuries. The relationship between the two is intimate and borders on the erotic. In the sixteenth century the parrot was associated with courtly love.¹⁴ Many prominent members of the French nobility, including Marguerite de Valois, Marguerite d'Autriche, and Jeanne d'Albret had pet parrots.¹⁵ It was for Marguerite d'Autriche, the wife of Philibert le Beau, that Jean Lemaire de Belges wrote the poem *Les Epîtres de l'Amant Vert*, in which the parrot is Marguerite's constant companion. The parrot describes her beautiful body, whether dressed or half-dressed, which he was privileged to behold. He talks of his growing love for Marguerite and is jealous of her lovers, whose activities he must watch.¹⁶ Similar representations depicting the parrot as the intimate companion of the woman, seeing her in a state of partial dress, and sharing knowledge of her personal life, recur over the centuries. They are found frequently in seventeenth century Dutch and Flemish paintings. The *Woman with a Parrot* by Frans van Mieris (Figure 3) is illustrated in Charles Blanc's *Histoire des Peintres*—a book consulted frequently by Manet in the 1860s.¹⁷ The painting is a genre scene of

6. Reff, “Olympia,” p. 112.

7. Pierre Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX^e Siècle* XII (Paris, 1867) p. 656.

8. Larousse, *Dictionnaire*, p. 657.

9. J. Selby Prideaux, *The Natural History of Parrots* (Edinburgh, 1836) p. 106.

10. *Le Magasin Pittoresque* 2 (Paris, 1834) p. 403.

11. *Magasin Pittoresque*, p. 400.

12. *Magasin Pittoresque*, p. 319.

13. Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, “Uytbeeldingen der Figuren” (Haarlem, 1604) fol. 131. Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Peruginio, 1613) pp. 207–209. For a discussion of the traditional iconography of the parrot, see E. K. J. Reznicek, “De reconstructie van ‘t’Altaer van S. Lucas’ van Maerten van Heemskerck,” *Oud-Holland* 70, (1955) pp. 239–246. In the time of Augustus Caesar parrots were taught to chant together “Ave Caesar.” In the Middle Ages this became associated with “Ave Maria,” and ultimately the parrot became a symbol of the perpetual virginity of the Virgin. Beginning in the sixteenth century, however, and increasing in the seventeenth century with the growing number of

parrots in Europe due to the explorations of America, the meaning of the parrot became secularized. This secular tradition appears to have continued into the nineteenth century. In fact, whereas the *Larousse* mentions the “Ave Caesar” (p. 657), there is no discussion of its religious correlate in the Middle Ages.

14. *Portrait of a Lady with a Parakeet*, school of François Clouet (1520–1530), shows Marguerite de Valois and her pet parrot; illustrated in the catalogue of the Roscoe collection of the Walker Art Gallery (Liverpool, 1928) pl. iv. For a discussion of this painting, including additional information on parrots, see Michael Compton, *Foreign Schools Catalogue*, Walker Art Gallery (Liverpool, 1943) pp. 71–72.

15. Compton, *Foreign Schools*, p. 71.

16. Jean Lemaire de Belges, *Les Epîtres de l'Amant Vert*, ed. Jean Frappier (Geneva, 1948) pp. 8–9, lines 112–122.

17. In this volume Blanc also illustrates Caspar Netscher's *Woman with a Parrot*, p. 3. For a discussion of Manet's relation to Blanc's oeuvre see Theodore Reff, “Manet and Blanc's ‘Histoire des Peintres,’” *Burlington Magazine* 112 (1970) pp. 456–458.

FIGURE 3

Woman with a Parrot, by Frans van Mieris. In Charles Blanc's *Histoire des Peintres de Toutes les Écoles*, l'école hollandaise, II, p. 21

a woman, dressed in a morning coat, feeding her parrot. Her affected feminine gestures are similar to Victorine's in Manet's work.

In Manet's own time there was a resurgence of these ideas about the relationship between women and parrots. According to the *Larousse*, it was believed that parrots spoke more readily in the presence of women and children.¹⁸ Flaubert's story "A Simple Heart," written in 1876, yields another example of the theme. Félicité, a servant woman, becomes deeply attached to her pet:

They had conversations with each other, he repeating ad nauseam the three phrases in his repertory, she replying with words which were just as disconnected but which came from the heart. In her isolation Loulou was almost a son or a lover to her. He used to climb up on her fingers, peck at her lips, and hang onto her shawl; and as she bent over him, wagging her head from side to side as nurses do, the great wings of her bonnet and the wings of the bird quivered in unison.¹⁹

Flaubert's last image connects Félicité and Loulou by stressing a point of physical resemblance in much the same way as Manet connects Victorine and her pet by rendering their gazes so similarly.

Remarkably, within several years of Manet's painting, at least two more renditions of this theme were produced in his circle. One was a drawing by his close friend Degas.²⁰ Here, as in the case of Victorine, the model wears a dressing gown that is open at the neck. She also gestures with her left hand. Although Degas's drawing is a straightforward rendition of the subject, Degas twenty years later wrote a sonnet about the intimacy between women and parrots. Dedicating it to Mary Cassatt and writing of her pet parrot, Coco,



Degas warned her against revealing her personal secrets to her "open confidant":

But know, like a little saint,
That a Coco collects his thoughts and recites
in his flight

What your heart has said to the confidant.
With the tip of his wing, quickly remove
A piece of his tongue so that he is silent . . .
and green.²¹

The parrot is Mary Cassatt's confidant and shares the secrets of her love life as did the parrot in Lemaire's

18. Larousse, *Dictionnaire*, p. 657.

19. Gustave Flaubert, *Three Tales*, trans. Robert Baldick (Baltimore, 1961) p. 47. The parrot is also referred to as a prophetic bird in Flaubert's *Salammô* (trans. E. Powys Mather [Berkeley, 1966] p. 37).

20. Ill. in Jean Sutherland Boggs, *Portraits by Degas* (Berkeley, 1962) no. 48, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, BN Carnet 8, p. 27.

21. Edgar Degas, *Huit Sonnets d'Edgar Degas* (Paris, 1946) pp. 27–28.



FIGURE 4

Woman with a Parrot, by Gustave Courbet. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, the H. O. Havemeyer Collection, 29.100.57

poem. The other rendition of this theme was by Courbet in *Woman with a Parrot* of 1866 (Figure 4). This striking reiteration of subject matter did not go unnoticed at the time. Chaumelin wrote in *La Presse*: “Manet has borrowed the parrot from his friend Courbet and has placed it on a perch next to a young woman in a pink dressing gown. These realists are capable of anything!”²² Recently the relationship between Courbet and Manet has been a subject for speculation. George Heard Hamilton has suggested that Courbet’s fully modeled female of 1866 was in one sense an answer to Manet’s *Olympia* exhibited in the Salon of 1865. He notes that the public saw Manet’s *Woman with a Parrot*, exhibited in the 1868 Salon, as a final rebuttal to

Courbet.²³ It is tempting to speculate on the possibility of closer ties between the two versions of the *Woman with a Parrot*, but when Courbet’s painting was being exhibited in the salon, Manet’s was already being shown privately to his friends.²⁴ Since Manet and Courbet knew each other, it is not impossible that Manet was aware of Courbet’s painting while it was in process, but the clear systematic order of events is not necessarily valid.

Although Courbet’s painting is thematically similar

22. A. Tabarant, *Manet et Ses Oeuvres* (Paris, 1947) p. 149.

23. Hamilton, *Manet*, p. 115.

24. Tabarant, *Manet*, p. 124.

to Manet's, there are nevertheless major differences, of which the most important is the sexual. Courbet's work is considerably more overtly erotic.²⁵ Sexual analogies between women and birds occur repeatedly in the history of art. In the seventeenth century birds and women were often so intimately related that the Dutch word *vogelen*, literally "to sell birds," also meant "to copulate."²⁶

For Manet the subject is not explicitly erotic. In 1866 he painted another work of the same theme, treating it as a purely genre subject. In this painting, entitled *The Guitar Player*,²⁷ Victorine wears a bohemian dress, plays a guitar, and is accompanied by a parrot.

The meaning of Manet's *Woman with a Parrot* is also not specifically sexual. The artist chose the gray parrot—known to be the most intelligent and talkative of parrots. He emphasized its relationship to the woman through physiognomic similarities. It would seem that Manet—like Lemaire, Flaubert, and Degas—is placing the parrot in the traditional role of close confidant. The woman's clothes and the objects surrounding her provide clues to the contents of these secrets.

The orange at the base of the perch is not a clue but is simply the bird's food. It is not cut but torn open. This is natural, for, in fact, the parrot's beak is particularly well suited for breaking the skins and seeds of different kinds of fruit.²⁸

Victorine wears a dressing gown or peignoir.²⁹ Black ribbons with brooches similar to Victorine's were frequently illustrated in the fashion magazines of the 1860s.³⁰ The women who wore them, however, were either in street clothes or dressed for the theater or a ball (Figure 5).³¹ Victorine appears to be part of this fashionable world, as evidenced not only by her brooch but by her exaggerated ladylike gestures. However, she seems to be only half elegantly dressed, as if she were dressing for, or coming home from, a ball.

25. Delacroix's *Woman with a Parrot* of 1827 falls into this aspect of the tradition. It is illustrated in *Eugène Delacroix*, Gabriel Maurey, ed. (Paris, 1927) pl. 3.

26. E. de Jongh, "Erotica in Vogelperspectief," *Simiolus* 3 (1969) p. 72, treats this subject in detail with many illustrations.

27. Paul Jamot and Georges Wildenstein, *Manet* II (Paris, 1932) p. 51, no. 127, now in the Hillstead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut.

28. Selby, *Parrots*, pp. 108–109.

29. Zola, *Salons*, p. 98, describes her as a young woman in a



FIGURE 5
Illustration from *Le Follet*, London, 1866. Art & Architecture Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

The violets support this idea. Manet himself connects violets with balls in his painting *The Bouquet of Violets* of 1872.³² Here the violets are juxtaposed with a fan and a dance card with Berthe Morisot's name inscribed on it. In the nineteenth century violets were proverbially associated with modesty.³³ Perhaps this accounts for the exaggeratedly dainty gesture. Victor-

pink peignoir smelling a bouquet of violets. Milla Davenport refers to her attire as a dressing gown in *The Book of Costume I* (New York, 1962) p. 925.

30. Davenport, *Costume*, p. 910.

31. At times these magazine models were even accompanied by parrots, as seen in the March 1865 issue of *Le Moniteur de la Mode*.

32. Jamot and Wildenstein, *Manet*, p. 192, no. 393. Present whereabouts unknown.

33. Larousse, *Dictionnaire*, XV, p. 1089.



FIGURE 6

Caricature by Gil of Manet's *Woman with a Parrot*, 1868. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Albert TenEyck Gardner, 64.693

ine, with her affected gestures and direct gaze, would seem to be a combination of the coy and the knowing.

The monocle is an unusual—if not shocking—detail, as testified to by a contemporary caricature (Figure 6). Here the monocle, disproportionately large, becomes an object of ridicule. Richard Corson writes that in the

nineteenth century only the lorgnette was considered truly elegant for women.³⁴ As for monocles, they were originally used largely by older men, but later were adopted by younger men to conform to the fashion.³⁵ Although Corson refers to a passing phase in the 1820s when women wore monocles, it seems that by the mid-century fashionable women carried lorgnettes and fashionable men wore monocles. Consequently one can speculate that Victorine's monocle is actually a man's monocle. Accordingly, the flowers could also be a gift from a man as they were in the *Olympia*.

Victorine in the *Woman with a Parrot* is not, however, a courtesan, as she is in the *Olympia*, but appears to be a fashionable Parisian of the 1860s. She wears a peignoir open at the top and jewelry around her neck as if she is in the process of dressing, perhaps getting ready for a ball. As in the *Olympia* she stares suggestively at us. At the same time Victorine smells her corsage and holds the cord of the monocle. If the flowers are related to the ball—most likely a gift from a gentleman—and the monocle is a man's monocle, then we are provided with the ambience and the clues to the romantic nature of the shared secrets behind the knowing stare of Victorine and her gray confidant. In accordance with the traditional iconography Victorine's parrot is her intimate companion, sees her in the process of dressing, and appears to share the secrets of her personal life.

34. Richard Corson, *Fashions in Eyeglasses* (1967) p. 142.

35. Corson, *Eyeglasses*, p. 114.