

## FALL PREVIEW

# The 19th Century's Most Scandalous Painting Comes to New York

“Olympia,” the brothel scene that birthed modern art, crosses the Atlantic for the first time in the Met exhibition “Manet/Degas.”

By Jason Farago

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“A colossal ineptitude,” one enraged critic called it. “Her face is stupid,” another wrote. The papers declared it “shapeless,” “putrefied,” “incomprehensible.” They said it “recalls the horror of the morgue.”

And when the Parisian crowds rolled into the Salon of 1865, they too went berserk in front of Édouard Manet's painting of a courtesan, her maid and her high-strung black cat. Spectators were sobbing, shouting, getting into scuffles; the Salon had to hire armed guards. The picture was so stark that visitors kept trying to puncture the canvas with their umbrellas. “Never,” reported one of Paris's better literary reviews, “has a painting excited so much laughter, mockery, and catcalls as this ‘Olympia.’”

“Olympia” now belongs to the Musée d'Orsay, where she still faces down crowds — calmer ones, though just as thronging — with her indelible blank stare. (The painting has often been called “she,” as if “Olympia” only pictured one person; we'll get to the pronoun problem in a minute.) Manet's bored prostitute in her unmade bed, stripped of all the Venusian grandeur in which male artists once dressed the female nude, has become the very image of modernity, even if her fame still trails that Italian woman across the river at the Louvre.

She's left the capital only three times in her life. In 2013, for her 150th birthday, “Olympia” went to Venice and got to hang next to Titian's “Venus of Urbino,” one of Manet's main inspirations. In 2016, the picture was shipped off to Moscow and St. Petersburg as part of an inglorious Franco-Russian diplomacy effort. (“We're less proud of that one now,” said Christophe Leribault, the Orsay's director.)

And on Sept. 24, “Olympia” arrives in New York, as the focal point of “Manet/Degas,” the Metropolitan Museum of Art's momentous fall exhibition of two city boys and the modern

capital they painted.



“Olympia” in her usual spot at the Musée d’Orsay, framed by two other paintings by Manet. “Manet/Degas” opens at the Met on Sept. 24. Sophie Crépy

Let me declare an interest: I am a Manet freak. To me he is more than just the greatest painter of the 19th century; he’s the supreme model of how an artist can meet the times head-on, and rewrite the rules of culture as the world outside jerks forward. Which is why “Olympia” coming to New York should be an event on the order of Michelangelo’s Pietà traveling to the 1964 World’s Fair in Queens, or Lionel Messi being transferred to Miami. Along with Manet’s “Luncheon on the Grass” (which can never leave Paris, per the terms of its donation), “Olympia” is the kill shot of European tradition, and the daybreak for an estranged visual regime still with us 160 years later. Everything that inflamed those first viewers — the forthright artifice, the flat and heavy brushwork, the unsentimental gaze — has made Olympia’s boudoir into the Kilometer Zero of modern art.

“It’s a celebration, obviously, because ‘Olympia’ has never crossed these waters, and it probably won’t again,” said Stephan Wolohojian, the Met’s head of European paintings.

Yet the painting’s trans-Atlantic voyage is so much more than a one-off masterpiece loan.

“Olympia” is central to the account of “Manet/Degas,” which maps how two very different artists built off each other’s examples to haul painting into a new age. The show is also a profound interlacing of two great museum collections, which each needed the other to reckon fully with the emergence of modern French painting. Nearly half of the show’s 160 works by Manet or Degas — this is a stunning fact — belong either to the Met or the Orsay.



An ink portrait of Édouard Manet, done by his friend and rival Edgar Degas between 1861 and 1864. Musée d'Orsay/Art Resource, NY

“Manet/Degas” was a hit in Paris this past spring; with 670,000 visitors, it became the

Orsay's third most popular show ever. Initiated by Laurence des Cars, the current director of the Musée du Louvre, the exhibition tracks the two painters' social worlds and family connections, as well as the artistic impact of political events such as the American Civil War. (Manet was revolted by slavery since a teenage trip to Brazil; Degas had relatives in New Orleans and painted his family's cotton office.) And as the curators — Wolohojian and Ashley E. Dunn in New York, and Isolde Pludermacher and Stéphane Guégan in Paris — probed these artists' interdependence, they agreed that the most startling of all Manet's paintings had to come along.

“It's not a chronological exploration,” Wolohojian told me. “It's not even a redirection of impressionism or 19th-century painting. It is actually a dossier, in the fullest sense. And so that's where the object list became key, and that's where something such as ‘Olympia’ became central.”

If Manet's art was revolutionary — the Impressionists who followed him idolized his frank gaze on contemporary city life — Manet the man was no rebel. He, like Degas, emerged from Paris's haute bourgeoisie, and he obsessed over public accolades. He truly thought the hidebound Salon would one day recognize his originality, and he got an honorable mention in 1861. But he'd taken brickbats for his “Luncheon” (which the Salon rejected in 1863) and “Dead Christ With Angels” (which it accepted in 1864). He really hit the limit a year later when he exhibited Victorine Meurent, his favorite model, with her chalky skin and red hair, posing like the goddess of love in a not-too-hygienic brothel.

The scandal wasn't the nudity itself. The Salon walls were jammed with bare-breasted Aphrodites. It was Manet's unabashed depiction of a prostitute *performing as an* Aphrodite — in an unadorned new style that made Olympia look like nothing more than a cutout on a stage set. “Falsity was what made her modern,” the art historian T.J. Clark once wrote — and what triggered the frenzy of 1865 was how Manet shattered both social and painterly expectations in the very same nude.

As for Degas, he'd submitted a stiff, medieval-inspired picture to the 1865 Salon, which drew no notice. But the “Olympia” scandal seems to have radicalized him. The next year, he abandoned traditional history painting to depict a modern tragedy of a jockey biting the turf. After Manet's death in 1883, from syphilis, Degas became perhaps his greatest champion. He chipped in to purchase “Olympia” for the nation, and in 1895 Degas bought a large copy of the painting — by a certain Paul Gauguin — to hang in his apartment in Pigalle.

So *attention*, New York, here she comes: or, rather, they. For more than a century after the scandal of 1865, artists and historians wrestled with Olympia's sallow skin, the bracelet on

her right forearm, the orchid in her upswept red hair. Only a few observers (the artist Lorraine O'Grady first among them) offered the same attention to the servant bearing a bouquet of flowers, even though she and Olympia occupy about the same square footage of the canvas. Bad reproductions sometimes make her blend into the background; in fact Manet lavished attention on her brown skin and pink dress, and painted her with lips open, as if speaking.

Manet's second model was also a professional, whose name we know only through a jotting in his notebook as "Laure, *très belle négresse*." Like Victorine, Laure posed for several other pictures by Manet and his contemporaries, and she sat at the heart of "Posing Modernity," an eye-opening exhibition at Columbia University in 2018 on Black models in 19th-century Paris. (That show's curator, Denise Murrell, now works at the Met and has contributed an expansive essay to the catalog of "Manet/Degas.")



Two portraits by Manet depict Laure and Victorine Meurent, both of whom also sat for his painting "Olympia." From left, Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

"This is an absolutely emblematic picture in the history of art, the history of modernity, which has generated hundreds of publications — in which you find hardly anything about one of the two models," said Pludermacher, the Orsay curator. Yet the painting has always been a double act. It's a self-conscious chiasmus of two women, both on the job. One Black and one white. One clothed and one nude. One whose gaze stays within the painting, and

one who peers right out from it.

Those oppositions get crossed and complicated in “Olympia,” and indeed many of the insults that rained down in 1865 grafted the two models together. (It was Olympia, not her servant, whom the critics described as an “African monkey” or worse.) That, too, is part of the genius of Manet. As the art historian Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby writes in her 2022 book “Creole,” “Olympia” never allows Manet’s models to recede into roles. The women stay on the flat surface, as living citizens of a Paris recast with boulevards, pleasure gardens, nightclubs ... and brothels. In “Olympia,” Grigsby argues, Manet did away with the “binary opposition of black and white” you might have seen in the Salon’s many imperial fantasies. What he painted instead was two working women — prostitute and maid, but also Victorine and Laure — “whose relation to each other remains unresolved.”

It’s partially thanks to American scholars like Grigsby and Murrell that New York will get this one-time-only encounter. “When I arrived, this was one of the very first dossiers I had to deal with: Do we lend ‘Olympia’ to the Met or not?” said Leribault, who was named Orsay director in the fall of 2021. “And to tell you the truth, I wasn’t so certain. For us, it means going without the most famous painting in the museum.

“But the fact that there’s been this research, this rereading of ‘Olympia’ in an American framework, made it all the more important that the work travel to New York,” he continued. “And also because it’s at the very heart of the relationship between the two artists.”

Yet it turns out that Olympia, or at least her model, has been to New York before. Last month, the anthropologist James Fairhead presented the astounding discovery of a newspaper interview from 1869 with a redheaded French dancer appearing onstage in New York. An enterprising producer had brought her from Paris to perform the cancan at a Broadway variety — and her name was Victorine Meurent.

Manet’s most famous model, it seems, was touring the United States with a comic opera troupe in 1868-69. After a scandalous opening night in Manhattan (which must have felt to her like *déjà vu*) a journalist from the Jersey City Evening Times came to the theater for an interview. “She was modest,” reports this rediscovered profile, “knew a good deal of English, had plenty of wit.” In her dressing room between cancan, Meurent “was copying a watercolor painting of one of our best American artists; and the copy was better than the original.” She had already assimilated, and brought to New York, the image of modern life.

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