

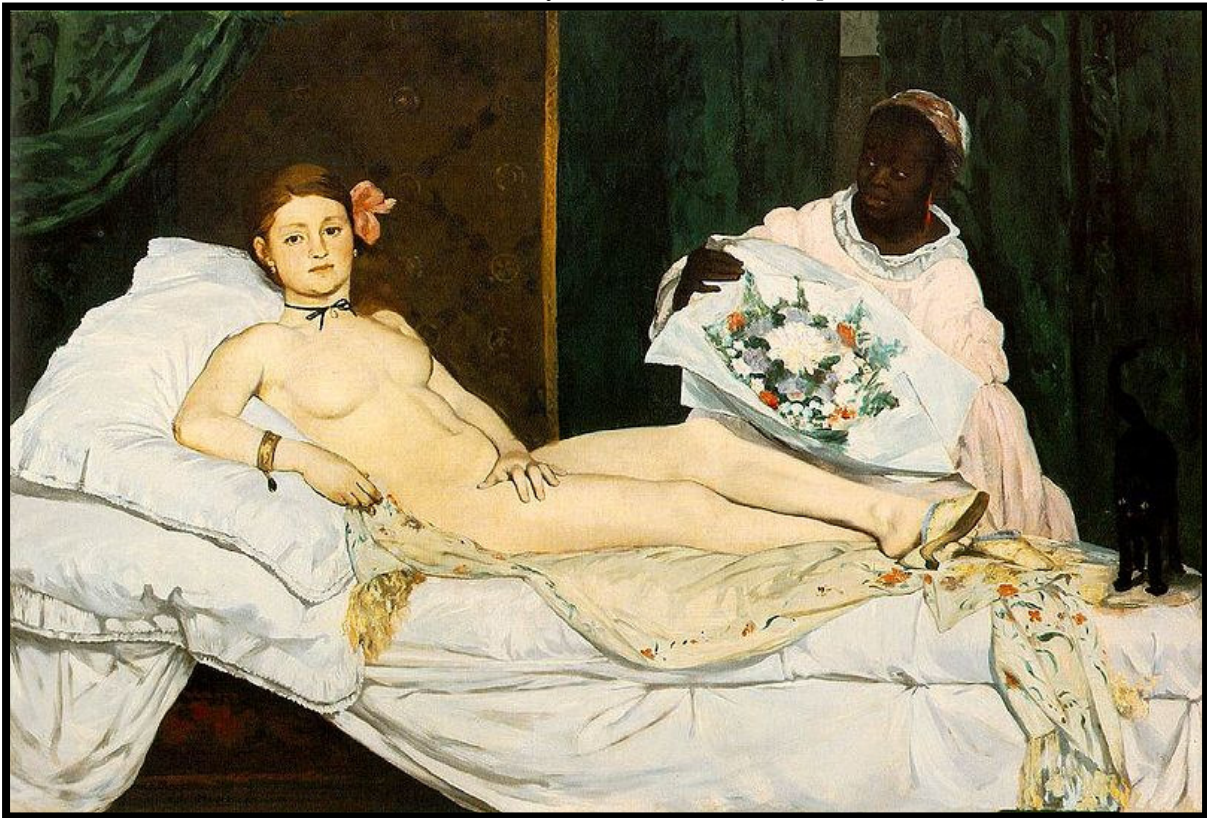
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Approaches to Art History

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The Essence of a Painting  
A Critical Analysis of Manet's *Olympia*



The methodologies that make up art history are vast and diverse. The discipline is fluid: as new artworks are produced, they demand different approaches for interpretation. It is impossible to find meaning in Michelangelo's *David* (figure 1) of 1504 using the same approach as one would when trying to understand Duchamp's *Fountain* (figure 2) of 1917. It is for this reason that art history has split into two categories which seem to overlap when the work requires: new and traditional. Traditional art history consists mainly of iconographical, biographical, formalistic, and spectatorship approaches. New art history deals with social historical, feminist, Marxist, and racial readings of a work, along with semiotics as applied to art. This paper will examine each of these approaches as applied to Manet's *Olympia* (figure 3). Looking at this one piece through many different methodologies will demonstrate how the meaning of the painting can vary depending on which type of approach is applied. Some approaches are more successful than others when applied to *Olympia*, but each offers a different and compelling reading of the work.

When discussing scholarship on *Olympia* it is crucial to start with the comments of Manet's contemporary, Emile Zola. Zola is one of the few art critics who believed *Olympia* to be a substantial work of art when it first appeared in the Paris Salon of 1865. Soon after he first saw the painting hung in the Salon, Zola wrote an article titled *Edouard Manet* in which he discussed the work of art and its accomplishments. It was the first and most recognized defense of the painting at the time, categorizing *Olympia* as a masterpiece in efforts to rekindle Manet's fame in the eyes of the public.

Zola is sympathetic to Manet in his critique for two reasons. First, Zola had taken a liking to the artist and admired his work. Second, Zola is a formalist. He refuses to look at *Olympia* with hopes of unearthing hidden meaning in the subject Manet chose to paint. Zola writes, "You

need a nude woman and you choose Olympia, the first-comer. You need some clear and luminous patches of colour, so you added a bouquet of flowers; you found it necessary to have some dark patches so you placed in a corner a Negress and a cat”<sup>1</sup>. Zola praises *Olympia* for its formal composition and its aesthetic visual quality. He believes every element in *Olympia* is rendered with the specific purpose of enhancing the visual ecstasy the viewer feels when looking at the painting.

The article, *Edouard Manet*, is strictly a formalist piece. It addresses color, form, and composition, the only components of an artwork that matter in a formalist interpretation. Zola writes, “Olympia, lying on white linen sheets, appears as a large pale mass against a black background. In this black background is seen the head of a Negress carrying a bouquet of flowers”<sup>2</sup>. Zola identifies the objects in the painting exactly as they appear. He does not read into the meaning of the items displayed. As a formalist, he may believe the objects have no other significance but to form a beautiful composition.

Zola directs the reader's attention to each of the formal elements of Manet's painting in turn. “At first sight there are only two tones in the picture – two violently contrasting tones. More however, all the details have disappeared”<sup>3</sup>. Zola, in pointing out the tonal quality of the work, takes the viewer’s focus off of the controversial scene presented in the painting. This painting’s subject disturbed many Salon goers when it was first displayed in 1865. It tarnished Manet’s reputation because viewers were too concerned with the scandalizing subject to look at the actual painting itself. After reading Zola’s article the viewer is likely to take a fresh look at the painting, seeing not a naked woman, but rather different light and dark contrasts that give the painting great aesthetic value.

The aesthetic effect of a painting is determined by its formal qualities. For a formalist art historian, form is content; the greatness of a work is strictly dependent on the visual appeal that its formal components are able to produce. Zola speaks of the colors, shapes, shadows, contrasts, lines, and how each is perfectly presented stating, “Nothing is more exquisitely delicate than the pale tones of the different white of the linen on which Olympia reclines”<sup>4</sup>. Zola uses the term “exquisitely” to convey the delight which the painting has brought him. For formalists, the quality of a work is dependent on the work’s aesthetic value, and a work’s aesthetic value is dependent on the cohesiveness of the texture and component parts of the painting.

Zola’s interpretation proves that formalists value form above content. Some formalist art historians go so far as to say “form *is* content”<sup>5</sup>. Zola fits into this characterization because in his article, he claims *Olympia* is a masterpiece, yet the only evidence he uses to support this claim are the strict formal qualities present in the painting. Zola takes it upon himself to explain why the formal qualities of the painting alone make it a masterpiece. He mentions how Manet painted Olympia’s lips as thin pale lines, and how the bundle of flowers is created from a mass of color. He points out how each object and figure in the painting relates to each other and is positioned within the work to create a cohesive whole, thereby achieving maximum aesthetic value.

The benefit of using a formalist ideology when looking at *Olympia* is having the ability see the quality of the painting itself in spite of whatever its content may be. It is important first to recognize the painting as a masterpiece for the artist’s technique before we indulge in finding meaning within the work. Zola’s scholarship, being the foundation to all future scholarship on *Olympia*, encourages art historians to explore the painting in more depth. Without Zola’s scholarship it is unlikely *Olympia* would have ever been regarded as a painting worthy of such intense study.

During the 1860s *Olympia* was too provocative to be given the opportunity to claim the title of masterpiece. Its viewers were too shocked with its content of the socially unacceptable subject to see the actual quality of the work. Zola gave significance to the painting when he labeled it a masterpiece at a time when every other contemporary who viewed the painting thought it was too vulgar to even be hung in the Salon. In fact, when the Paris Salon of 1865 first opened, *Olympia* was given a place of great prominence. Due to its negative reception, however, it was repositioned and moved from a place of prime viewing to high above other paintings so that it could barely be seen. If it were not for Zola's important review of the painting, then *Olympia* may have been remembered as one of Manet's biggest failures rather than one of his greatest successes.

Since its debut in the 1865 Salon, *Olympia* has continued to cause quite a stir in the art world and continues to be studied and critiqued by many art historians. Paul Jamot provides an additional formalistic analysis of *Olympia* but does so quite differently than Zola. Instead of stating the formal qualities of the painting and explaining how they work together to create a masterpiece, Jamot compares *Olympia* to Goya's *The Naked Maja* (figure 4).

Comparisons between two paintings are often made in formalist interpretations because they allow the viewer to understand why certain special compositions and color pairings work while others do not. Jamot says Manet's inspiration for the painting was Goya's *The Naked Maja*, but believes Manet's painting is superior because he was able to master the composition and placement of objects more so than Goya. "He felt himself capable of rising above Goya by the strength of his contours, by his complete understanding of the art of contriving an entire composition, in this case achieved by the arrangements of accessories around the central theme"<sup>6</sup>. Jamot, in comparing *Olympia* to *The Naked Maja*, failed to point out the compositional

failures of *Maja*, but assured his readers that Manet's *Olympia* was an artwork of a higher quality.

Jamot praises the lines and compositional structure of *Olympia*. For him, *Olympia* is superior to other paintings of its likeness because Manet truly understood how to work form and color. In his essay, Jamot takes issue with many contemporary art critics who state their displeasure with *Olympia*. As a formalist, Jamot believes that all of Manet's decisions when creating this painting were guided by the visual pleasure that would be derived from them. Jamot believes that Manet did not intend for any of the elements in his painting to take on external meanings. Instead, he theorizes that Manet paints objects which he believes will complement each other to create a visually pleasing composition. He believes that Manet uses color to create shadows and contrasts, which in turn give the viewer an enjoyable experience when looking at the painting.

Critics at the time were mainly concerned with the significance of the figures in the painting and what each was meant to represent. One critic asked, "With what sinister significance were the ebony figure and the multicolored flowers arranged? Even the black cat arching its back at the end of the bed seemed full of disquieting enigmas." Jamot addresses this concern by saying, "People shook their heads when told that Manet had ... a special weakness for cats, and were not to be persuaded to see in it only what it was; a simple artistic invention, as innocent of hidden meaning"<sup>7</sup>. His explanation is simple and definite. He almost mocks the critic for asking such a question, scolding him for trying to insert meaning into an insignificant figure.

It is this attitude that leads to the failure of Jamot's article in convincing the reader that Manet's painting is a masterpiece. Jamot tries too hard to convince his reader that *Olympia* was never meant to be anything but a picture. Zola's formalist interpretation is more successful

because rather than forcing the reader to accept that Manet includes objects simply because they work best, Zola tells his reader why contrast and color are so important in creating visual beauty. Zola convinces his reader that *Olympia* is a masterpiece in form while Jamot claims it is a masterpiece simply because he likes it more than Goya's *The Naked Maja*.

There may be truth in claiming that Manet's *Olympia* was inspired by Goya's *The Naked Maja*, but this assertion provides no backing to Jamot's argument. Jamot tries to persuade the reader to believe that *Olympia* is meaningless and should be appreciated solely for its form but he fails to provide any substantial commentary on the formal aspects of the painting that would make his argument convincing. He does make one accurate claim stating, "Manet's *Olympia* is worthy to be compared with acknowledged masterpieces. It is worthy because Manet, like Titian and Goya, was actuated by purely pictorial considerations"<sup>8</sup>. It is undoubtedly true today that *Olympia* is worthy of being called a masterpiece for its compositional innovation and design, but the accuracy of the claim leads us no closer to understanding why the formal qualities of the painting make it a success. For this, we must rely on Zola.

Zola's formal analysis opens the door to additional interpretations of *Olympia*. It is the foundational piece of scholarship on *Olympia* and it challenges other scholars to voice their views on the importance and meaning of the painting. Carol Armstrong, for one, uses Zola as a basis to build her own argument. What is unusual, however, is that Armstrong bases her assessments of Zola's attitude towards *Olympia* not on his claims, but rather on his description of the artist himself.

Zola's original article is divided into three sections: *The Man and the Artist, His Works*, and *The Public*. Zola addresses *Olympia* in the second and third sections, *His Works* and *The Public*. He fails to mention the painting in the first section, in which he instead focuses on the

artist's character and life. It is from this first segment, *The Man and the Artist*, which Armstrong uses to support her biographical reading of *Olympia*.

Armstrong focuses on Manet's life and character. In her book, *Manet Manette*, she dedicates a section on *Olympia* where she sets out to unveil the connection between the artist and his painting. Armstrong's main claim is that the woman in the painting is a representation of Manet himself. Armstrong states three times in this section of her book that, "This is Manet the man, whom *Olympia* represents," but then goes on to make many ill-fitting comparisons between the life of the artist and the painting itself<sup>9</sup>.

For instance, Armstrong cites biographical elements of Manet's life which were made public by Zola. It is believed that Manet made a journey down the Rio de Janeiro as a navy apprentice. Armstrong believes this was a life altering event for the young artist that would later find its own existence in Manet's *Olympia*. Armstrong suggests that Manet painted *Olympia* while nostalgically remembering his time at sea. The curves of her body were meant to represent the waves of the sea and the woman an embodiment of nature. This connection that Armstrong draws is weak and she provides no evidence to make these claims convincing. It is to our luck that the art historian does not rest upon these claims but continues to assess *Olympia*, thereby making more convincing arguments for how Manet himself is represented in his painting.

Armstrong remains determined to convince her reader that *Olympia* embodies Manet and cites a caricature of the painting to prove her point. The caricature, done by Bertall, was given the title, "Manet, ou la femme d l'ébéniste" which means *Manet, or the wife of the carpenter*. Armstrong believes that "If in 1865 one of the prominent caricaturists of the moment had seen *Olympia* not only as a prostitute (as was the norm) but also as an image of Manet himself, dubbing her 'Manette', so did Zola in 1867"<sup>10</sup>. She criticizes Zola for producing a safe and



acceptable formalist interpretation of the painting when, Armstrong believes, he understood the self-identification that Manet had infused into his painting.

Armstrong reiterates time and time again that *Olympia* is Manet in pictorial form but she continually fails to substantially back up her claim. She relies heavily on the work of Zola, yet Zola explicitly states, “I have only a few biographical details concerning [Manet]”<sup>11</sup>. Over and over again, Armstrong tries to impress upon the reader that Manet’s soul is bound to the courtesan’s body, saying the painting is a biography of the artist. It is clear that it was speculated at the time of its debut that *Olympia* may have been a painting that was created to represent its artist’s desires, but Armstrong fails to build upon this claim. She writes a biographical analysis that is devoid of any biographical fact.

Unconvinced of this biographical reading of *Olympia*, the critical art historian must next turn to John Berger’s argument that suggests the importance of the spectator in understanding the meaning of the work. The role of the spectator is often overlooked but can add tremendous insight when trying to understand different analyses of a particular painting. John Berger is an English art historian who created a short television series titled *Ways of Seeing*, which aired on the BBC in 1972. This documentary style series is Berger’s attempt to reveal the problems that our technological society has created in the art world.

He begins the series by impressing on the viewer all the ways that art can be manipulated today. It is very rare for a person to first encounter a painting in its original setting or in person at all. The world is full of images of paintings which have been reproduced time and time again in the form of posters, postcards, slides, and images in textbooks and magazines. These reproductions make it easier for the original work of art to be manipulated and forced to take on a meaning the artist never intended it to have.

Berger's television series does its job in raising the question of the spectator and his place in art history. After the series aired, he produced a book with the same title that discussed the concepts he covered in his documentary in further detail. While John Berger's book does not go into too much detail discussing *Olympia*, it is still important to consider his article, *The Gaze*, when interpreting the painting.

Berger mentions Olympia's gaze and her effect on the person viewing the painting. Olympia's gaze implies a male spectator, forcing everyone who views the painting to take on this masculine identity. The implied male spectator is also the implied male client in the scene. Unlike traditional scenes of female nudity and male spectatorship, Olympia is not subservient to her viewer's gaze. Instead, she returns the gaze, bringing into question the role of both the male viewer and the female subject.

*Olympia* is a unique painting in the way it allows the female figure to dominate the male viewer. The viewer, taking on the role of the male spectator, is hoping to gain self-affirmation by overpowering the female subject. Olympia is, arguably, a nude. Historically, paintings of nudes are meant to engage the male viewer, allowing him to dominate her thereby fulfilling his own fantasies in his mind's eye. However, Olympia is not a typical nude. She makes direct eye contact with the viewer. She is neither subservient to the viewer nor aggressive, she is simply impenetrable.

In his documentary series, Berger addresses the historical significance of the female nude. Berger, however, does not consider *Olympia* to be a painting of a nude; rather, he understands it is a painting of a naked woman. Berger delineates the two, saying, "To be naked is to be one's self. To be nude is to be seen naked by others yet not recognized as one's self. A nude has to be seen as an object to be a nude"<sup>12</sup>. Olympia's gaze, meeting the gaze of her

spectator, shows us that Olympia is not an object. She is not sitting there in hopes of being admired by a man; she is sitting there with confidence, aware of her role in the scene. Olympia is a courtesan and this painting does not try to hide that fact. She is naked and true to her own identity as a prostitute, addressing her male client with an air of defiance.

The viewer is excluded from the scene, but is still a necessary component of it. Manet creates a psychological gap between the male gazer and the subject. She is not what the male viewer expects to see. The male viewer wants to encounter a reaffirmation of himself and his desires. Instead, this unexpected exclusion which creates a stark psychological distance leaves the viewer with a sense of discomfort and confusion, forcing the viewer to consider himself in relation to the scene presented before him.

*Olympia* sets the foundation for the modern nude and the avant-garde female. “A man’s presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies. If the promise is large and credible, his presence is striking. If it is small or incredible, he is found to have little presence”<sup>13</sup>. Berger raises this question of male power and where that power derives from. In Manet’s *Olympia* this male power is reduced because of the meaning brought forth by Olympia’s gaze. She is not sitting on the bed ready for a man to approach and control her. Instead, Olympia’s assertiveness and self-awareness reduces the power of both the theoretical and the actual spectator. Olympia recognizes that there is someone standing in front of her and because she is lying purposefully naked it is assumed that the spectator is a male. According to Berger, a male’s presence in front of a nude suggests that he is capable of doing whatever he desires with her. *Olympia*, however, is different. In *Olympia*, the prostitute’s gaze tells the viewer that she has the power to say yes or no. She is in control, and the male spectator is not.

As we begin to understand that Manet painted his *Olympia* to force the viewer to reconsider his role in society, it is not so farfetched to believe that all the components in Manet's painting take on deeper meaning than just themselves. Art historian Charles Bernheimer believes that everything Manet depicts in the painting takes on a grander meaning than just being an object used solely for compositional purposes as Zola suggests. Bernheimer's iconographical reading of *Olympia* stems from the meaning he puts into the figure's hand. He reads deeply into the placement of the hand and what it suggests to the viewer.

It is common knowledge in the art world that Manet had studied Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (figure 5) and that *Olympia* alludes to that painting. The two paintings are often viewed side-by-side so as to emphasize the differences between the gazes of the two women. Both women make direct eye contact with the viewer, but the implication of each confrontation is quite different. Venus's stare is engaging and delightful. She wears a slight smirk and the viewer is left with a desire to approach the woman and participate in the scene before him. Olympia's gaze on the other hand is unpleasant and frigid. It creates a barrier between the viewer and his object. As Berger understands it, the barrier which is created actually removes Olympia as an object and transforms her from a simple and beautiful nude into a real naked woman.

This argument that suggests Olympia's realness when she is compared to nudes of the renaissance was first brought to our attention by John Berger, but is reiterated in Charles Bernheimer's essay, *Manet's Olympia*. Bernheimer reiterates Berger's concept of the nude, stating, "Traditional representations of the nude put women on display for the pleasure of a spectator. Her naked body becomes nude insofar as it is seen as an erotic object offered to the man's gaze, to his imaginary knowledge. The terms of the offering ... [are] to flatter the male viewer and to stimulate his fantasy of sexual domination"<sup>14</sup>. This difference between a nude and

a naked woman must be understood to completely appreciate Bernheimer's iconographical reading. While Berger simply raises the issue of the spectator and what it means to be the object of a gaze, Bernheimer goes further in addressing the issue. He addresses the issue of being naked but not nude and how it can entirely change the nature and meaning of the work. Olympia's resistance to be subjected by the male gaze calls the viewer to question the identity of the woman. Knowing her true identity helps Bernheimer claim that *Olympia* was a painting of a real person and not a construction of male fantasy.

An iconographic reading of *Olympia* is not concerned with the social identity of each figure. Bernheimer does not care to know that Victorine Meurent was the model for the painting. He is only concerned with Manet's intention of painting a woman as she would be seen in real life French society. He focuses, then, not on Olympia's identity but on the meaning of the subject matter and how it furthered Manet's intentions of putting a real woman on display for all to see her as she truly exists.

Bernheimer's essay is unique in that while most essays that compare Titian's *Venus of Urino* to Manet's *Olympia* focus on the gazes of the two women, Bernheimer chooses to focus his attention on the meaning that derives from each woman's hand. Bernheimer argues that Olympia's hand in particular causes the viewer to relate the painting back to Titian's previous work. Each hand is expressive in its own right. Titian paints his Venus's hand softly with fingers folding inward to caress herself sensually. "The gesture carries a certain autoerotic suggestion, but the suggestion, as I read it, in no way excludes a male viewer; on the contrary, it serves as an invitation, a sign of receptivity"<sup>15</sup>. Venus touches herself erotically creating a sexual tension between herself and the supposed male viewer. He is invited into the scene to fantasize about the nude and how he would interact with the figure before him. She is engaging and warm,

encouraging the viewer to fantasize. In contrast, the hand in Manet's *Olympia* is stiff and fierce, acting as a shield to her genitals rather than an invitation.

Recognizing the juxtaposition of the two hands is meant to shed light on other iconographic images included in *Olympia*. Manet chooses to make the hand the central focusing point of the painting to help the viewer understand less explicit objects such as the black cat and the black maid. For Bernheimer, everything in this painting has meaning. He criticizes Zola for treating the painting with indifference and naivety. He says that, "Treating Olympia's body as just another inanimate object, Zola attempts to cancel out her provocative sexuality"<sup>16</sup>.

*Olympia* is full of sexual overtones which are brought to light by her hand. The hand's placement over the genital region draws the viewer's attention to the absence of pubic hair. While addressing the issue of pubic hair, Bernheimer fails to point out that traditionally, no nudes are painted with pubic hair. Olympia's bare skin raises again the issue surrounding the definition of a nude. A nude is an idealized body meant to be seen as an object of desire while a naked figure presents a real person with a true identity. Without pubic hair present on the figure, Manet is idealizing the figure thus asking us to see her as a beautiful nude, not as a real life courtesan.

Bernheimer, however, is convinced of Olympia's nakedness and finds pubic hair represented symbolically throughout the painting. He unconvincingly tells the reader that the fringe of the blanket on which Olympia sits alludes to the missing pubic hair. Bernheimer provides no evidence to the origin of this assessment and gives the reader no explanation as to how he has drawn this conclusion relating fringe to pubic hair.

Bernheimer continues to find pubic hair present in other objects. The most convincing, he believes, is its representational presence in the loose clump of hair that falls freely onto

Olympia's left shoulder. Looking closely at the painting, what Bernheimer could be mistaking as hair, is more likely a shadow. Bernheimer is trying so hard to find pubic hair represented by objects throughout the work that he ends up convincing himself that a shadow is an object and we readers, in understanding this, are left to pity Bernheimer's feeble attempt at an iconographic reading of the work. Bernheimer however does not rest his argument there. He next references the black cat as a substitute for the missing pubic hair saying that the slang term for cat, in both the French and English language, can refer to the female sex organ. Again, he makes this connection but provides no evidence to back his claim.

According to Bernheimer, every object in *Olympia* is meant to emphasize the sexual undertones of the painting. The hand blocks our view of Olympia's genitals, therefore Bernheimer is led to believe that the bouquet of flowers is used by Manet as a way to allude to them. This is Bernheimer's first claim that seems believable, but not because of Bernheimer's essay. Flowers have consistently been a sign for fertility in art, and while Bernheimer does not explain this in his essay, readers educated in art history are led to make this inference.

Bernheimer believes that the black maid also embodies the sexual desires Manet is working to convey. Bernheimer points out that the pairing of a black woman with a white woman suggests the primitive desires and sexual degeneracy of the white woman, "So the black maid is not, as Zola and the formalists would have it, simply a darkly colored counterpart of Olympia's whiteness, but rather an emblem of the dark, threatening anomalous sexuality lurking just under Olympia's hand"<sup>17</sup>. The juxtaposition of the colors may indeed take on a deeper meaning of sexuality. This last claim is Bernheimer's most successful because it associates the black maid with a primitive type, as was commonly understood of black woman in the 1800s.

This connection relates a primitive being to sex, and sex itself can be understood as a primitive and animalistic desire.

Bernheimer's claims are lofty but raise important questions as to the meaning within *Olympia*. His concerns are mimicked in Sharon Flescher's essay, *More on a Name: Manet's "Olympia" and the Defiant Heroine in Mid-Nineteenth Century France*. Flescher straddles the lines between iconography and social history, using contemporary documents to shed light on the meaning of the painting.

The title of the painting, *Olympia*, is Flescher's main concern. She sets out to uncover its origin in hopes of finding deeper meaning in the painting. Manet's model for *Olympia* can be identified as Victorine Meurent, a notable prostitute of the time. However, Manet's does not choose to name his painting after his sitter, instead he chooses a seemingly arbitrary name, *Olympia*, that was dismissed with an air of unimportance in the Salon. Only two art critics at the time ever question the name of the painting or believed it to hold any significant meaning.

Flescher provides only one possible origin for the title *Olympia* and he creates a very persuasive argument as to its derivative. She claims that Manet's painting and the woman in it were named after the heroine *Olympia* in the French opera *Herculanum*. The two fictional women are contemporaries of each other and, as Flescher points out, share tremendous similarities.

Flescher makes his readers familiar with *Herculanum* and Queen *Olympia* so that they can form their own conclusions as to whether or not *Olympia* was named for the Queen. This is one of the most successful iconographical essays on *Olympia* because it is small in scope – its purpose is only to try and explain one possible meaning of the title and it does so very convincingly. Furthermore, Flescher explicitly states that it is not her intention to show a direct



link between the identities of the women, she sets out only to show that the two share similarities. This disclaimer strengthens her argument because she accepts that the similarities between the two women could simply be coincidental.

In the opera, Olympia is “a brazen and seductive pagan queen – powerful, independent, and defiant,” qualities that we have come to associate with the Olympia in Manet’s painting<sup>18</sup>. Flescher goes further than simply drawing a connection between the personalities of the two women, she says the composition of the painting even resembles the staging and costumes of *Herculanum*. “Queen Olympia was regally outfitted, waited on by costumed black servants and courtiers, and housed in a magnificent palace”<sup>19</sup>. While Manet’s Olympia is not necessarily wearing a majestically royal outfit, her shoes, earrings, bracelet, and the ribbon around her neck do show that she may have been well off.

The shoes on Olympia’s feet along with her jewelry are a common subject of debate among Manet scholars. It has been argued that the subtle articles are a reference to the well debated question of nudity and nakedness. Since Olympia is not entirely unclothed, completely in a state of nature, many believe that this is Manet’s way of showing viewers that she is not a classical idealized nude, rather she is a naked and defiant woman. Other art historians question the articles for their monetary worth. If Manet’s *Olympia* was simply a portrait of a prostitute, then how is she able to afford these jewels and a servant? It seems to make sense that if Manet’s Olympia was modeled after Queen Olympia in *Herculanum*, then she would be able to afford these lavish decorations and a servant. However, there still remains the question of why she is naked. But, as Flescher stated at the beginning of her article, she is not saying that Manet’s Olympia is Queen Olympia from *Herculanum*, she is only disclosing the striking similarities which the two share.

Here is a passage from Flescher's essay which demonstrates the exquisite connection that Flescher reveals between the two Olympias. While reading the following excerpt, the reader should make an attempt to identify which Olympia Flescher is referring to in the passage:

She is neither the plaything nor the coy manipulator of powerful men. Nor is she merely indulging her sexual appetite ... Rather she herself is a source of power. She needs nothing from the man she uses, manipulates, and dominates<sup>20</sup>.

The point in this exercise is to demonstrate the accuracy of the connection Flescher makes. She wrote the above passage referring to Queen Olympia, but it could just as easily be applied to Manet's Olympia. While looking at Manet's Olympia, there is no suggestion that the subject is being overpowered by the viewer as is the case with Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Manet takes a traditional art type, a nude, and transforms it into an iconographical image which alludes to the truthful status of a naked woman in nineteenth century Parisian society. The nude becomes a prostitute, and instead of falling into her traditional subservient role, she is a source of power dominating the male viewer.

Flescher believes that Manet has twisted the subservient role of the prostitute to be domineering and defiant, all accomplished through the simple name of the painting. "The name, with its overtones of independence and defiance, also brings to mind the self-imposed, independent Parisian coming into prominence at this time, along with the rising tide of feminism and changing economic structure"<sup>21</sup>. Here is where Flescher begins to straddle the line between an iconographical reading and a socially historical one. She is no longer making the claim that *Olympia* is meant to allude to Queen Olympia of *Herculanum*, but she is going a step further in comparing Manet's *Olympia* to the social identity of a female in nineteenth century Paris.

Victorine Meurent, Manet's model for *Olympia*, is a woman of nineteenth century Paris. In 1865, when *Olympia* first appeared in the Salon, Victorine Meurent was criticized just as much as *Olympia*. She was a lower-class model from the streets who, as many believe, Manet

had picked at random. However, Victorine Meurent was not picked at random. She was the model in many of Manet's paintings and he took a likening to her. Unfortunately for Manet, it was Victorine's reputation for being an alcoholic and a prostitute that gave critics more of a reason to degrade *Olympia*.

Eunice Lipton, in her book *Alias Olympia*, considers the many negative perceptions of Victorine Meurent and ends up debunking many of the claims made against her. Lipton is convinced that the men who were so eager to criticize Manet's painting for his figure's impenetrability did not comprehend the meaning in Manet's work. Instead of trying to understand why Manet chose to render Olympia this way, the critics criticized Manet's work for being an artistic failure. "Men shook with rage in front of *Olympia*. She was unmanageable; they knew she had to be contained. These men only meant to persuade her, a single unwieldy woman, to comply"<sup>22</sup>. Viewers were angry because this nude was unconventional and upsetting. It is upon this base of thought that Eunice Lipton sets out to uncover the true identity of Victorine Meurent and her social identity in Parisian society to better explain *Olympia*.

Eunice Lipton heavily researches the life of Victorine Meurent. Lipton is more entranced by the woman herself than her presence and meaning in *Olympia*. Lipton travels to Parisian archives to see if she can uncover any information that would be useful. She finds many documents and letters both by Victorine Meurent and her contemporaries. The book acts as a memoir of Lipton's journey in unearthing the lost identity of this woman, but it also provides deep insight into how societal factors influenced and shaped the meaning of *Olympia*.

As we look at *Olympia*, Lipton points out, we are looking at a woman who has the ability to say "yes" or to say "no". She is not simply the object of gaze, she is an identity. She is a nobody, yet she *is* somebody. She is an unadorned, typical, plain prostitute, a product of France

in the 1800s, yet Olympia has much more of a presence behind her gaze than nudes before her such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Lipton describes Olympia as, "A woman whose naked body said: 'See this? It's mine. I will not be the object of your gaze, invisible to my own. This is my body, my life'"<sup>23</sup>. This could only be achieved by using a woman of Victorine Meurent's social status and reputation.

Lipton believes that Manet made the conscious decision to use a real, everyday woman as a model to bring a sense of modern reality to the painting. *Olympia* is not meant to be a romantic scene depicting a young, coy woman ready to accept and be subjugated by the man presented before her. It is a portrait that is very frank and truthful, showing its viewer a real woman in nineteenth century France.

Eunice Lipton almost completely disregards anything in the painting besides Olympia herself. She focuses on the figure's gaze and what it reveals to the viewer. She mentions her interpretation of the painting has changed and deepened over time as she has come to identify with the figure and better understand her thoughts. This social historical interpretation of the painting relies on texts and archival documents but fails to provide the reader with a solid understanding of French society. While Lipton goes into great detail on the life of Victorine Meurent, she seems to forget that Meurent was only a model for *Olympia*. Lipton associates one identity with the other. She believes that Meurent is Olympia, and that Olympia is Meurent. Instead of a painting, Lipton treats *Olympia* as a photograph and tries to uncover the biography of the woman.

Social, cultural, and economic factors all begin to come into play in Lipton's book, but she applies them mostly to Victorine Meurent, not to *Olympia*. While it was Lipton's aim to uncover the true identity of the woman, some might find it impertinent to understanding the

painting. It is important to know who Victorine Meurent was so that we can understand her connection to *Olympia* beyond her being the model, but it would be more prudent for Lipton to have provided more of a social context as to what events were taking place that may have shaped Manet's rendering of his model.

T.J. Clark takes social art theory and goes one step further. He is a Marxist art historian and views *Olympia* as a statement on the social classes. Like art historians before him, he addresses the issue of Olympia's nudity. Clark believes that Olympia is a prostitute and that Manet, by representing a modern prostitute as a nude, is calling the viewer's attention to the commonly held beliefs associated with prostitution.

Prostitution is of great interest to Clark because it brings the working class and the elite together in one hidden venture. During Manet's time, prostitution was extremely common and accepted, but was not to be publicly discussed. Manet challenges this hidden culture of sex and money in Paris by presenting, so plainly, a prostitute. He does not hide her true identity, casting her as an idealized nude. He presents her as she would be found laying out before a male client.

In Beatrice Farwell's own critique of T.J. Clark's book *The Paintings of Modern Life*, she unearths Clark's view on the classical nude and Olympia's nakedness. He "opposes nakedness to nudity as a sign of class, and concludes that the reason for the critics' difficulty in classifying *Olympia* was that they were unable to see that the sign of class was in her nakedness, not her accessories"<sup>24</sup>. Viewers and art historians alike try to categorize Olympia by what surrounds her in the painting. The shoes on her feet and ribbon on her neck make it very difficult for the viewer to say for certain that this is a picture of a prostitute. As discussed before, if *Olympia* is a prostitute it would be unlikely that she would be able to afford a servant and these bits of jewelry. Clark believes that we have mistakenly associated these elements with her identity and

that it is impossible to uncover Olympia's social status by what surrounds her. "Reduced to its most simple form, this chapter's argument amounts to saying that the sign of class in *Olympia* was nakedness"<sup>25</sup>. Here, Clark makes the distinction between 'nudity' and 'nakedness'. Everything in the painting besides her nakedness is meant as a "lure", but it is her nakedness that solely reveals her social identity. It is this nakedness and not the adornments around her that tells us she is of the working class.

It was not that Manet painted a picture of a nude or the fact that the woman portrayed is of a lower echelon of society that made people upset when the painting was hung in the Salon. It was that Manet displayed her so frankly as a prostitute, forcing the viewers to take notice and confront this underground activity in Parisian society. Everyone was aware of the existence of prostitution but no one dared to speak of it. Prostitution meant class ambiguity because it placed upper class men and lower class women in the same setting. "Prostitution is a sensitive subject for bourgeois society because sexuality and money are mixed up in it"<sup>26</sup>. By depicting a prostitute, Manet is alluding to the economic structure that lies beneath the act. He is showing the interaction of the working class, being represented by Olympia, with bourgeois society. The monetary payment that takes place in exchange for sexual favors put social classes in into perspective and makes us reconsider their existence.

T.J. Clark's book reinvented *Olympia*. When Clark compares *Olympia* to paintings of traditional nudes he is aware that he is comparing apples to oranges. That is why, despite the many differences between them, Clark claims that, "For the nineteenth century, this painting *was* the nude"<sup>27</sup>. He addresses the issue of modernity and believes that it not only refers to a changing style of art, but to the current condition of society. He is successful in changing the way people

think about *Olympia*. Clark brought Olympia to life, recreating her as representation of everything modern: money, class, and sex.

Modernity is of central concern for Clark. He suggests that it not only applies to the change that took place in the art world in the nineteenth century, but to the changes in society. The two, he argues, occurred simultaneously, each feeding off the other. Sociologist Robert Witkin is next to consider modernism as a factor in the way Manet's painting was both made and perceived. He questions "value" in modern society and uses social theory to analyze *Olympia*. He is aware that social theory can only go so far in analyzing a work of art, and makes it clear at the beginning of his essay that he does not set out to overstep the boundaries.

Witkin is very cognizant of the place sociology has in art historical study and cites Howard Becker's (1982) *Art Worlds* in agreeing that sociologists have been encouraged to "pursue fruitful inquiries into the production and reception of art works in a way that circumvents critical questions of interpretation, style, and meaning in works of art"<sup>28</sup>. Inspired by this, Witkin confronts *Olympia* and tries to understand society through the painting and vice versa.

Witkin's main concern is value. Like T.J. Clark, Witkin is interested in the role of social classes in *Olympia*. He believes social relationships can be used to help us understand why there is aesthetic value in looking at a modern work of art. Witkin is very interested in modernity and in how Manet's painting contributes to its development. He believes that Manet has embraced class differences in his painting and calls attention to this. He mentions that Olympia seems to have a "non-identity" since she is neither distinctly a working prostitute, nor an upper-class nude.

Witkin uses social theory as a basis upon which to build his semiotic reading of *Olympia*. While he uses social history to argue his interpretation of the painting, his true goal is to discover why specific components in the painting correlate with specific meaning. He argues that value

and motives of an artist “configure the aesthetic strategies of an artist like Manet – those comprising the modernist presentational code – that are the semiotic correlates of these changes in the construction of discourse”<sup>29</sup>. He uses flatness as an example of how certain painterly techniques are meaninglessly interpreted in the art world.

Flatness, so commonly associated with modern art, is one of the main visual elements of *Olympia*. Witkin asks, “Why did so many artists find it so necessary to produce this effect almost as though it was a badge for modernity?”<sup>30</sup> This is the type of question a semiotician tries to answer. He does not accept that flatness means modernity. He tries to uncover how history has shaped the meaning of flatness over time so that it has become an unquestioned association to modern painters.

Witkin forces his reader to question what it is that has made us come to view *Olympia* as a modernist painting and Manet as a modern artist. Even the act of comparing *Olympia* to historical nudes shows our unquestioned acceptance of this tradition in art. Because it is a painting of a nude, we automatically want to associate *Olympia* with renaissance art such as Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, forcing ourselves to draw similarities between the two. “In reality, however, she is a thoroughly nude figure and the parodic deconstruction of Titian is actually constructive of her modernity”<sup>31</sup>. Witkin asks his readers to reconsider why *Olympia* is a modern painting. Whether they associate it with modernity because of its flatness or because of its contrast to Titian’s work, Witkin wants his reader to use social history to uncover where modernity derived from and why we understand it as we do.

The social historical study of art bases its claims off of historical documents and economic and cultural norms of the period. Nineteenth century Paris, as Manet’s painting indicates, was home to an underground culture of prostitution. Prostitution has been studied by



feminists and sociologists, and art historian Lisa Vogel combines the two. In her book *Fine Arts and Feminism: The Awakening Consciousness*, she explores erotic imagery in fine arts and how it relates to popular imagery.

She discusses *Olympia* in light of two art critic's views: Gerald Needham and Beatrice Farwell. Needham believes that up until *Olympia*, paintings of nudes had been considered fine art and socially acceptable to look at. Needham points out that while this was commonly accepted, in truth there is no difference between a painting of a nude and a photograph of one. They are both pornographic images, but because we label one "fine art" it becomes much more appropriate to look at than a photograph of a naked woman.

Needham goes so far as to claim that all past images of nudes in art make up a more primitive form of pornographic photographs. He mentions *Olympia* and how the special composition of the artwork completely relates the painting to pornographic photos. This, Needham claims, is what upset viewers the most – her shameless suggestiveness, allowing herself to be viewed by any man that approaches her.

Vogel agrees with the connections Needham makes between pornographic photographs and what is considered high art, but does not think that he goes far enough into explaining the connection. "[Needham] entirely misses the way which *Olympia* also presents a stylistically integrated image of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and aggressive independence – truly a visual counterpart to the nineteenth-century social awareness that bourgeois marriage and prostitution were in hideously hypocritical relationship to one another"<sup>32</sup>. Vogel is very interested in the role of the woman in society and how that role was translated into art. She believes that art of the past was produced with one viewer in mind: an upper-class white male.

Vogel criticizes art history for ignoring the relationship that exists between art and upper-class wealth. She believes *Olympia* is the most daring statement made by any artist in the nineteenth century to unveil this connection between art, wealth, and society. The female nude is the one constant throughout the history of art where we are able to see the same subject being depicted again and again in different time periods. We can trace the change in the nude as an art type because it is clear that a change has occurred. There is no question that the nude in *Olympia* is of a different type of nude than Titian's *Venus of Urbino*.

Vogel seeks to explain the societal changes that altered the way women are painted and perceived in art. "Most interestingly," she writes, "woman has become the chief subject of art in capitalist society, and changes in the relationships between the sexes are expressed"<sup>33</sup>. Art historians have traditionally ignored the impact of class when interpreting a piece of art. Vogel argues that this is one of the major pitfalls of art history because every painting is made to be viewed by or created for a specific reason, and money is behind the making of each masterpiece.

Vogel also touches upon racial issues noting that race and class distinctions are often portrayed in paintings by including a dressed maid contrasting her naked mistress. This is exactly the scenario presented to us in *Olympia*. Vogel's racial arguments are only brought to light by class distinctions. It is not the race of the maid she is concerned with, but what the maid's race implies. Owning a black servant was a sign of wealth and Vogel believes that Manet is clearly making a connection to class distinctions by including her in the painting.

Vogel's approach to art history successfully links social context to gender and racial concerns. She raises many important questions about economic and societal influence in art and forces her reader to confront these issues. A painting can only be fully understood if we understand the context in which it was created. Vogel's arguments suggest that a painting, while

created at a certain moment in history, can be used in the present to explain societal changes and point out norms of the past that have changed over time. *Olympia* not only reveals the class structure of the past, but forces us to examine the role of women in the present.

The role of women in art has just begun to be considered a major component in studying art history. It was not until the feminist movement really took off that art historians began to accept feminism as a valid approach to studying art. Griselda Pollock is a notable feminist art historian who focuses on *Olympia*'s role as a prostitute and the social and economic inferences Manet is making. While Vogel sees Manet's painting as commentary on social history and Pollock understands it as commentary on gender relationships, the two articles overlap as they argue their own points. It is understandable that the two would share elements in common because gender issues can only be brought to life by studying the social context in which they exist and how they have changed.

For Pollock, *Olympia* represents a power issue and calls into question the place of women in French society. "The painting signifies commodity, capital's penetration of bodies and desires where the sale of monetary rights to the usage of body, of a social and gender 'other', is also, for the bourgeois man, the purchase of pleasure and access to the experienced power"<sup>34</sup>. For Pollock, *Olympia* is not a painting of a woman by any means. She is painted as an object with no meaning other than to be a commodity.

Pollock, too, mentions that the painting was seen as scandalous when it was first introduced to the public in 1865. Since its introduction, *Olympia* has been studied primarily as a painting of a nude prostitute; Pollock challenges this idea. "The painting's title is a name used in the higher echelons in the prostitutional trade, and it typically gets associated with the white female figure in the painting, rather than being read as referring to the social and symbolic

situations collectively dramatized by both women”<sup>35</sup>. The name of the painting is increasingly becoming of great concern in the art world. Here, Pollock is saying it is a common name for prostitutes at the time, while Flescher believes Manet titled his painting *Olympia* to allude to the subservient and independent protagonist in a contemporary opera. If we are to believe Pollock, that the name represents the figure’s identity as a prostitute, than we must also accept her interpretation that this is a painting that alludes to the secret economic and sexual exchanges occurring in France in the nineteenth century.

*Olympia* is no traditional nude. Manet’s avant-garde treatment of *Olympia* has created a truthful representation of how a modern nude would truly exist in society. Pollock notes that, “*Olympia* was about European modernity figured by anxiety about commercialized sexualities in the modern metropolis”<sup>36</sup>. Manet chooses to embrace the changing role of sexuality in his painting instead of trying to cover it up. Through *Olympia*, Manet opens the eyes of Parisians to what a real modern nude is in France at the time: a prostitute, a working woman whose body is bought and sold.

Along with other art historians, Pollock claims that it was Manet who began and truly brought to life this movement towards modernity. There could be no mistaking *Olympia* as a traditional, idealized painting of a nude. Manet was the first to modernize the nude. “Modernizing the typologies of sacred and profane love, as well as the association of nudity with truth, the painting made a virtue of insisting on the female body’s social identity constructed by a modern, urban and classed organization of sexuality”<sup>37</sup>. Pollock stresses modernity and encourages her readers to look at the painting as social commentary and to understand the real role of a female in nineteenth century France. She encourages her readers to understand the

feminist changes taking place in society and understand *Olympia* as documentation of those changes.

Along with the changing role of the female, perceptions of race were also challenged at the time of *Olympia*'s creation. Shelly Eversley's article *The Sexual Body* deals with sexuality in terms of race as it relates to *Olympia*. Her essay is different from many others because she mentions both *Olympia* and the black maid. This is intriguing because many articles that spend the majority of their space on *Olympia* almost completely disregard the black maid, whereas this short article, which only mentions *Olympia* briefly, calls the reader's attention to the presence of the black maid.

The article is mainly concerned with the changing concepts of race and how it is treated by a society. Eversley writes, "Olympia and her maid exist at a moment when the terms of race, sexuality, and racial violence were contested and particular – political economic arguments about the slave trade and abolition situate the passive gesture of Olympia's maid in a material context that we ignore at our peril"<sup>38</sup>. So far we have only discussed the maid to help us better understand *Olympia*. Eversley treats the maid as an individual figure, however, focusing on her own individual significance. This approach forces the viewer to see the black maid for who she is and to consider her social context as a black woman in nineteenth century France. The only disadvantage of doing this is that Manet, placing the two women so close together in the same scene, may have wanted his viewer to understand the two women only in relation to each other. Regardless, Eversley article is very successful in making readers view Manet's painting in relation to racial prejudices at the time of *Olympia*'s creation.

The author believes Manet's art was influenced by the slave trade's effect on French society. He paints in the black maid to provide a subtle hint of the political battle being fought

between Europe and Africa. Eversley writes that, “at the moment of emancipation, black women’s reproductive identities also shifted from being foundational to white men’s wealth to being obstacles to that wealth – a binaristic racial logic meant that free black women have never produced children for the state but, rather, produced children as a challenge to the state”<sup>39</sup>. Eversley’s concern with reproductive rights comes from her fascination with the body and its political significance. Here she specifically mentions a black woman’s body and the likely significance of what it meant for her to be a free woman. After reading Eversley’s view on the situation, we look at the black maid in *Olympia* in a new light.

Eversley’s article may convince others to go back to the painting and reconsider the meaning associated with a black maid. Before reading Eversley’s article, one might assume the maid’s existence in the painting was to show Olympia’s social status. However, as Eversley’s iconographic reading suggests, the maid may take on meaning herself rather than just acting as a lens through which viewers interpret Olympia. The black maid is not accidentally holding a grand bouquet of flowers. It is common in art to use flowers to represent fertility and in taking a second look at the painting, one can see that the black maid seems to be handing these flowers to the white female, Olympia. The black woman, no longer having the ability to produce children that will be welcomed into society, is giving her ability to reproduce to the white female Olympia, who does not fall subject to the political problems associated with racial reproduction.

Other art historians, too, have questioned the significance of the black maid in the background. Formalists believe she is black simply to better contrast Olympia’s pale skin, but Jennifer DeVere Brody, an African history scholar and the author of *Black Cat Fever: Manifestations of Manet's "Olympia"*, finds deeper significance in the black maid. While Brody claims that her analysis of *Olympia* derives from a type of performance theory, her article more

directly deals with feminist theory, iconographic issues, and most importantly race. She cites herself as a black feminist who is also a “queer”. She begins by taking issue with how paintings are “read” in today’s world, saying we do not see paintings as they are, rather we see black and white reproductions or power point slides meant to highlight specific aspects of the painting.

Brody understands that spectatorship can greatly change the way a painting is perceived. She develops the idea that reading a painting is a conscious act and that “the ways in which art performs” – how it is shown to a viewer – “directly impacts how art is read”<sup>40</sup>. Brody mentions that *Olympia* is most commonly regarded as a portrait of a female nude, and urges viewers to read more deeply than that. “In this queer black feminist reading, Manet’s masterpiece provides, through fraught seeing, a means to perform with, for, and through other audiences and viewers”<sup>41</sup>. She encourages the viewer to see the painting for what it is and to not fall into the trap of looking at it as a painting of a female nude and comparing it to others of the type.

Brody’s most convincing argument lies with her interpretation of the black maid included in Manet’s painting, who she believes is too often overlooked. She first draws our attention to the importance of this background figure by studying letters from Manet’s childhood and using them as evidence. At the age of sixteen, Manet sent a letter to his mother from Rio de Janeiro. His journey there would have long lasting implications in his career as a painter. The letter states, ““in this country all the Negroes are slaves; they all look downtrodden; it’s extraordinary what power whites have over them; I saw a slave market, a rather revolting spectacle for people like us”<sup>42</sup>. Manet empathized with black people for the way people of his own race treated them, thinking they had ownership over them. This issue of slavery can be seen in *Olympia* herself. Just like the black slaves, Manet saw on his journey that prostitutes in France were enslaved to society. They were play-toys for men, easily dominated and controlled. Manet, however,

challenges this type of female slavery by portraying Olympia as a defiant, independent woman capable of making her own decisions.

Manet is disgusted with the way black women are treated in these foreign countries and brings light to the issue in *Olympia*. Brody mentions that the “black feminist re-readings of *Olympia* revive the black figure, erased in the title of the painting, and reveal her presence. They show how she grounds the figure of whiteness. Indeed, the two-tone twinned identities of the ‘women’ in the picture are represented not only in formalist terms as the sutured light and shadow of chiaroscuro, but rather as political representations”<sup>43</sup>. It is clear that as a black woman, Brody gave more attention to detailing the black woman in the painting than the typical white male viewer would have. She has discovered the postcolonial meaning Manet infused into his art. Manet allows his viewers to look over the woman, allowing her to blend into the background going unnoticed.

Brody says that in *Olympia* the black maid is portrayed with even less importance than a slave. A slave represented property and wealth and therefore if a slave is owned by a white man, the slave would actually raise the economic standing of its owner, thus taking on a sense of importance. After the slave trade ended, owning a slave no longer increased the social status of the white owner. Instead, whites had come to simply disregard the presence of blacks altogether, exemplified by the maid in this painting. For so long she went unnoticed, blending into the dark background viewed only for formalist interpretations. Brody mentions that other authors have overlooked Manet’s reasoning for including the black maid so she has proclaimed it her duty to unmask racial meanings that have been left untouched.

These twelve interpretations of Manet’s *Olympia* help to show the different prejudices that exist in the world of art history. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, but together they all



challenge art historians to better understand the work. It is necessary to have a formalist base upon which other arguments can be made. If one does not understand the aesthetic value and the elements in the painting, it is near impossible to decipher any meaning from it. Formalism is the most common approach to the study of art history because it is the one that can most closely be associated with the artwork itself. A formalist reading cannot be wrong. In *Olympia* there is a black cat, there is a woman, and the woman is naked. None of these claims can be disputed which is why formalism is the most truthful and honest approach to art history. However, formalism negates all possible meaning infused into an artwork. Iconographic and feminist readings are examples of approaches that seek to understand the deeper meaning an artist might have sought to convey through his work. However, once an art historian finds meaning in an artwork, his claims are based more on guesswork rather than irrefutable facts.

Guesswork is necessary in the discipline of art history. Looking at paintings only through the eyes of a formalist would not do the artwork justice because the painting would never be thought to carry any significant meaning with it. Although formalism is based on pure visual facts, it is wrong to assume that formalists believe an artwork has no deeper significance than its exterior appearance. Formalists are unconcerned with the meaning within an artwork because they are afraid to make false claims. Biographical and social historical type approaches to the discipline have accepted that in order to understand an artist's true intention in producing an artwork, guesswork is necessary and false claims may be made in efforts to uncover a greater truth.

In regards to the twelve interpretations examined in this paper, apart from formalism which is superior to all other interpretations for its truthfulness, John Berger's argument, which analyzes the significance of the spectator, is the most convincing approach to analyzing *Olympia*.

For many, the most striking element in *Olympia* is her gaze. It is unlike any that came before it and it draws the viewer to look at the painting. Not to be misunderstood, Olympia's gaze entrances the viewer, causing him to be mesmerized by the mysterious scene before him. It does not, however, invite the viewer to participate and fantasize about her. Her gaze is impenetrable and Berger does a fantastic job convincing his reader that Manet had intended for this gaze to upset the entire public when the painting was first displayed in the 1865 Salon. For the first time, it made the viewer aware of himself and his relationship with the painting. When looking at *Olympia* it is impossible to detach oneself from the scene. Meeting Olympia's fierce gaze demands that you experience a complete sense of self-awareness.

Berger's argument that the spectator plays just as important of a role in this painting as Olympia herself has changed how this painting will be viewed for years to come. He has convinced the art world that looking at a painting is a two way affair. Olympia is staring at the viewer, forcing him to recognize his own existence, just as he is staring at her. From this we begin to understand that Olympia exists not only on canvas, but in all of society. She is both a courtesan and an ordinary woman – her independence and self-assertiveness force the viewer to confront the changing social norms. *Olympia* has changed the way art is used and perceived, transforming the act of looking at a painting of a woman into a debate on sexuality and modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> Zola, Emile. "Edouard Manet." *Art in Theory, 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. (Harrison, Charles, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, ed. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Edited, 2007): 562.

<sup>2</sup> Zola, 562.

<sup>3</sup> Zola, 562.

<sup>4</sup> Zola, 562.

<sup>5</sup> Adams, Laurie Schneider. *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996): 21.

<sup>6</sup> Jamot, Paul. "Manet and the Olympia." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 50 (1927): 35.

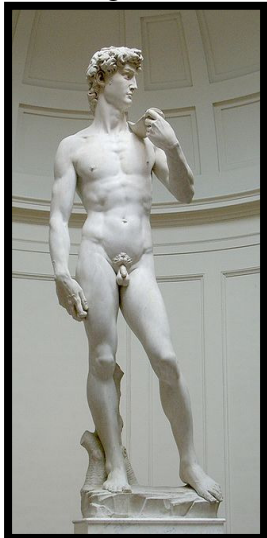
<sup>7</sup> Jamot, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Jamot, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Armstrong, Carol. *Manet Manette*. (Princeton: The Publications Committee, Department of Art and Archeology, Princeton University Press, 2002): 35.

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- <sup>10</sup> Armstrong, 45.
- <sup>11</sup> Zola, 556.
- <sup>12</sup> Berger, John. "Ways of Seeing." BBC. TV, 1972.
- <sup>13</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. (London: Penguin Books, 1981): 45
- <sup>14</sup> Bernheimer, Charles. "Manet's *Olympia*: The Figuration Scandal." *Poetics Today* 10 (1989): 258.
- <sup>15</sup> Bernheimer, 268.
- <sup>16</sup> Bernheimer, 264.
- <sup>17</sup> Bernheimer, 272.
- <sup>18</sup> Flescher, Sharon. "More on a Name: Manet's 'Olympia' and the Defiant Heroine in Med-Nineteenth-Century France." *Art Journal* 45 (1985): 27.
- <sup>19</sup> Flescher, 28.
- <sup>20</sup> Flescher, 29.
- <sup>21</sup> Flescher, 31.
- <sup>22</sup> Lipton, Eunice. *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desires*. (London: Cornell University Printing Press, 1992): 4.
- <sup>23</sup> Lipton, 15.
- <sup>24</sup> Farwell, Beatrice. "Review." *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 4 (Dec. 1986): 686.
- <sup>25</sup> Clark, T.J.. *The Painting of Modern Life*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999): 146.
- <sup>26</sup> Clark, 102.
- <sup>27</sup> Clark, 94.
- <sup>28</sup> Witkin, Robert. "Constructing a Sociology for an Icon of Aesthetic Modernity: Olympia Revisited." *Sociological Theory* 15, no. 2 (Jul. 1997): 101.
- <sup>29</sup> Witkin, 104.
- <sup>30</sup> Witkin, 110.
- <sup>31</sup> Witkin, 115.
- <sup>32</sup> Vogel, Lise. "Fine Arts and Feminism: The Awakening Consciousness." *Feminist Studies* 2 (1974): 16.
- <sup>33</sup> Vogel, 5.
- <sup>34</sup> Pollock, Griselda. *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History*. (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1992): 35.
- <sup>35</sup> Pollock, 35.
- <sup>36</sup> Pollock, 35.
- <sup>37</sup> Pollock, 40
- <sup>38</sup> Eversley, Shelly and Jennifer L. Morgan. "The Sexual Body." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35 (2007): 10.
- <sup>39</sup> Eversley, 13.
- <sup>40</sup> Brody, Jennifer DeVere. "Black Cat Fever: Manifestations of Manet's 'Olympia'." *Theatre Journal* 53 (2001): 101.
- <sup>41</sup> Brody, 99.
- <sup>42</sup> Brody, 105.
- <sup>43</sup> Brody, 103.

Figure 1



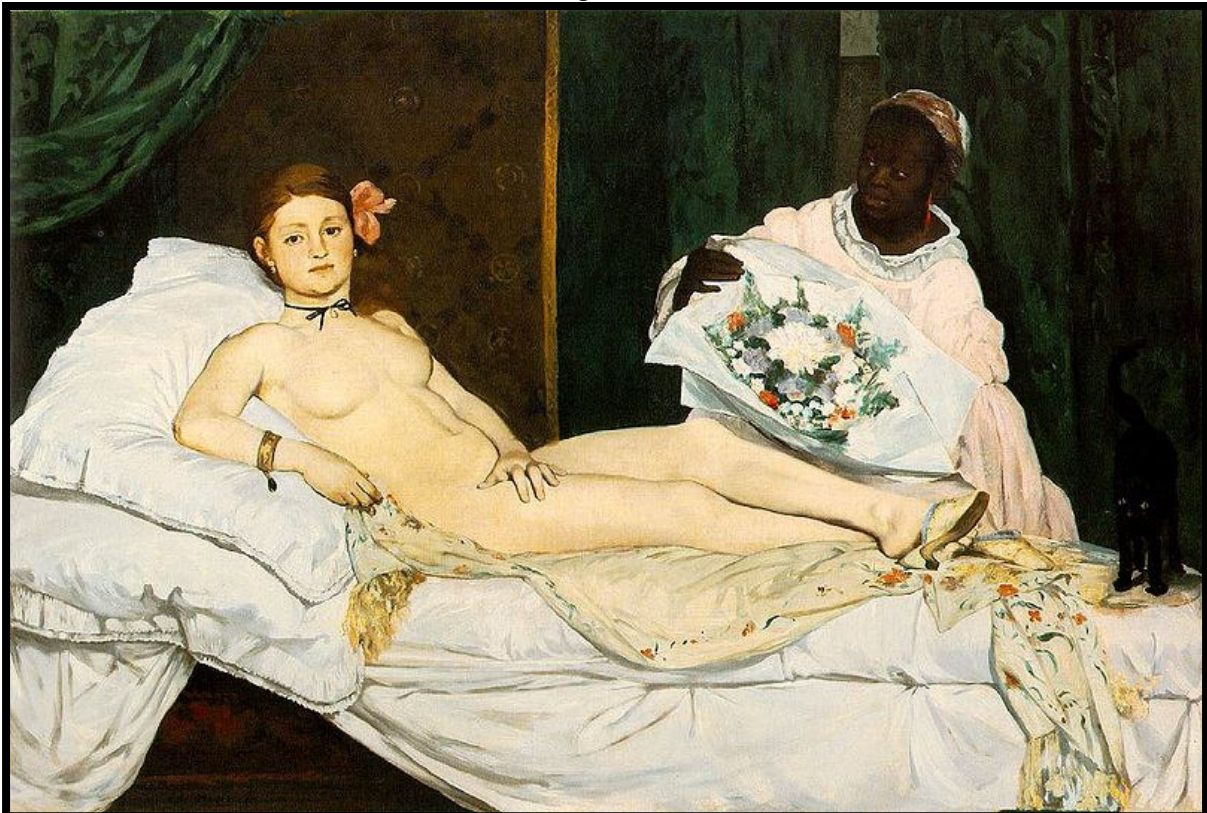
*David*, Michelangelo, 1501-1504

Figure 2



*Fountain*, Duchamp, 1917

Figure 3



*Olympia*, Manet, 1863

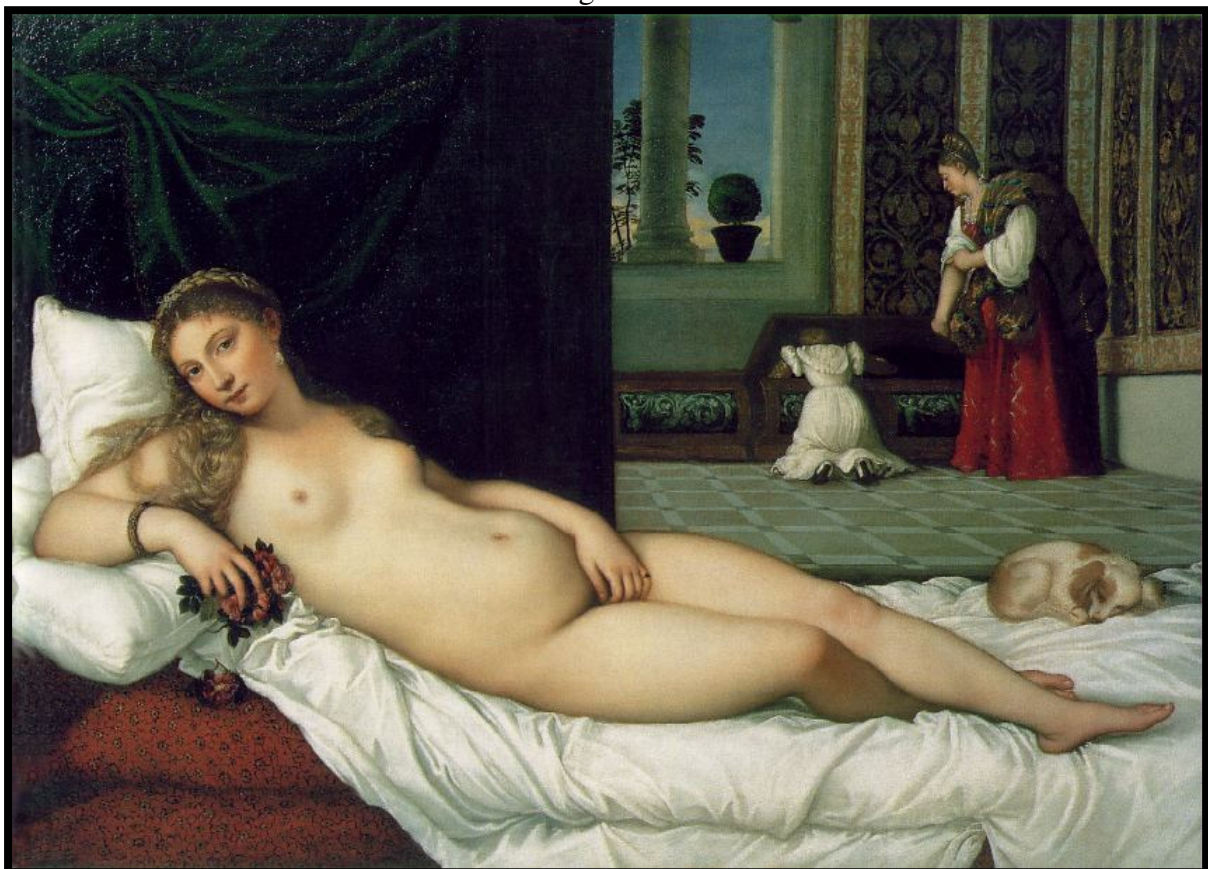


Figure 4



*The Naked Maja*, Goya, c.1800

Figure 5



*Venus of Urbino*, Titian, 1538