

'Portrait of Mademoiselle Claus'

Edouard Manet (1832-1883)

oil on canvas, 111 x 70 cm

Painted in 1868, the subject of the portrait is Fanny Claus, a close friend of Manet's wife Suzanne Leenhoff. It was a preparatory study for 'Le Balcon' which now hangs in Musée d'Orsay. Originally the canvas was much larger, but Manet cut it up so that Berthe Morisot appears truncated on the right. He kept the painting in his studio during his lifetime. The artist John Singer Sargent then bought it at the studio sale following the artist's death in 1884 and brought it to England. It stayed in the family until 2012 when it was put up for sale and The Ashmolean launched a successful fundraising campaign to save the painting from leaving the country.



© Ashmolean Museum

Edouard Manet

Manet was born into a prosperous family in 1832. As a young man he frequented the fashionable cafes of his native Paris from which he drew inspiration for many of his paintings. His choice of contemporary subjects together with his bold handling of paint also led to much criticism from the establishment. He broke new ground in rejecting many of the conventions of the *Salon* (the exhibition of the French Royal Academy) but his ground breaking approach to art won him much support from contemporary artist and writers alike. Today he is credited by many as the father of modern art

'Portrait of Mlle Claus' was a study for one of Edouard Manet's most famous paintings 'Le Balcon'. As a first sketch it has a spontaneous quality. Her features are brilliantly drawn and are more defined than they are in 'Le Balcon' where Mlle Claus has retreated into the background. The play of light across the dress, the use of obvious brush strokes and limited colour palette are typical of Manet's style and particularly striking in this work.

'...one must be of one's time and paint what one sees.'

Edouard Manet

Subject matter

Manet was one of the first nineteenth century artists to paint modern life subjects instead of traditional subject matter such as mythology, allegory, and history. He preferred to paint from reality and broke new ground by choosing subjects from the events of his own time. He frequently used family and friends to pose for everyday scenes.

Mlle Fanny Claus was a concert violinist, a member of the first all women string quartet and a close friend of Manet's wife Suzanne Leenhoff who was a talented pianist. In 'Le Balcon', Fanny has retreated into the background and the central position is taken by Berthe Morisot, a famous Impressionist artist in her own right and a lifelong friend of Manet.



'Le Balcon'
Edouard Manet, 1868
© Musee d'Orsay, Paris

Techniques

Manet broke many of the technical rules of the Salon. His pictures looked unfinished and art critics of the day were enraged by his unconventional style.

His sketchy brushwork lacked the finish expected and made no attempt to disguise brush strokes. Manet did not want any 'stews or gravies' so abandoned the use of layers of paint and glazes over a dark brown ground. Instead, he painted *alla prima*, in one layer on a white ground. He worked quickly, scraping back the paint if he made a mistake.

The 1800s saw the development of synthetic pigments, providing artists with vibrant colours never before available. In 'Portrait of Mlle Claus', Manet has used the new mauve for her sash and, shocking at the time, an intense synthetic green, for the shutters and balcony railings.

Manet's work also abandoned illusionism, the attempt to produce artistic representations of real things. Rather than carefully modelling form, he used contrasting blocks of light and dark colour with no depth and hardly any shadows.

Manet looked to the Old Masters ...

As a young artist Manet spent much time copying paintings at the Louvre but he also travelled to Spain, Italy and the Netherlands. He especially admired the work of Frans Hals, Velazquez and Goya. 'Le Balcon' is said to have been inspired by the glimpse of a family grouped on a balcony during a holiday in Boulogne. However there is no doubt that it also pays tribute to Goya's 'Majas on a Balcony' which Manet saw on a trip to Spain in 1865.

In 'Le Balcon' Manet has borrowed Goya's front-on composition but has compressed the depth of field so that the figures are pushed right up to the front. This unfocused frieze-like composition is very modern – there is no illusion or depth. The underlying feel of the painting is different as well. There is a mood of intimacy and intrigue between the characters on Goya's balcony but there is little interaction between those on Manet's balcony. He has created a modern scenario with each character lost in their own thoughts.



'Majas on a Balcony',
Francisco de Goya y Lucientes
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

... as well as to contemporary artists

A few years earlier James Whistler's, 'Symphony in White', had experimented with the radical idea of imposing a single colour note throughout a composition. In this work Whistler was only interested in tone and surface texture and delicately painted both dress and background in different shades of white using the paint to suggest differing textures. Manet can be seen to be exploring this radical idea in 'Portrait of Mlle Claus'.



'Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl',
James McNeill Whistler
Courtesy National Gallery Art, Washington

'...I paint what I see, and not what others like to see.'

Edouard Manet