

'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

A modern portrait?

Manet's 'Portrait of Mlle Claus' has an enigmatic quality that makes it very modern. The remote and disengaged look on Fanny's face suggests a sense of isolation in urban society. The painting tells no story and its very lack of narrative invites the viewer to construct their own interpretations. It is a painting that has the ability to speak to us across the years.

Influence of photography

The development of photography in 1839 had a powerful influence on artists. Its ability to create a likeness had an immediate impact.

Photography presented another way of seeing the world with blurrings, unusual juxtapositions and the accidental cropping of figures. Manet had a keen interest in photography and kept albums of photographic calling cards. These influences are evident in the pose and deliberate off-centre composition of 'Portrait of Mlle Claus'. He has cropped the painting so that the figures and room behind are only partly in view. His figures are more two-dimensional and he has a new form of perspective which is both focused and blurred. To our eyes, the painting could almost be a snapshot.

Use of family and friends as models

Manet broke new ground by defying traditional techniques of representation and by choosing subjects from the events and circumstances of his own time. He also wanted to make a commentary on contemporary life and frequently used family and friends to role play everyday (genre) scenes in his paintings.

'Le Balcon' which depicts a group of people on a balcony, was one of the first in which Manet painted close friends. 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, a talented pianist. Standing next to her is Berthe Morisot (a famous Impressionist artist and lifelong friend of Manet). Their positions were reversed in 'Le Balcon' where Morisot sits in the foreground.



'Edouard Manet',
David Wilkie Wynfield, c 1868
© Royal Academy of Arts

Staged scenes

Manet also incorporated family and friends into staged scenes portraying various aspects of urban life in Paris. He painted 'Music in the Tuileries Gardens' at the suggestion of the poet Charles Baudelaire. It was Manet's first major work depicting modern city life and at first glance it simply shows a fashionable crowd listening to an open air concert in the park.

It is in fact a carefully composed group portrait which contains numerous identifiable sitters from the world of Parisian art and culture. Nearly the entire gathering is made up from friends, artists, authors and musicians known to Manet including Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Henri Fantin-Latour, Jacques Offenbach, and Manet's brother Eugène. He has even included a self portrait of himself as a *flâneur* to allude to his modernity.



'Music in the Tuileries Gardens', Edouard Manet, 1862
© National Gallery

'Déjeuner sur l'herbe' shows Victorine Meurent, one of Manet's favourite models, posed with Ferdinand Leenhof on the right (Manet's brother-in-law) and a composite portrait of Manet's two young brothers, Eugene and Gustave on the left.

Manet based 'Déjeuner sur l'herbe' on two Old Master's paintings – Titian's 'Fete Champetre' and Giorgione's 'La tempesta'. It was first exhibited in 1863 at the *Salon des Refusés*. The subject matter may well have been traditional but the naked figure of a woman seated with two clothed men caused an outcry and aroused the hostility of art critics.



'Déjeuner sur l'herbe', Edouard Manet, 1863
© The Courtauld Gallery

The father of modern art

Contemporary artists such as Fantin Latour, Whistler and the Impressionists were much more interested in what Manet was trying to achieve as were the writers and poets Zola, Mallarmé and Baudelaire. They regarded Manet as a modern master and as their leader in the attack on the stale academic vales of the *Salon*, (the exhibition of the French Royal Academy). Manet himself believed future audiences would better understand his work claiming 'their vision will be better than ours'. Today he is credited for his pioneering role and is viewed as the father of modern art.

'Around the painter so disparaged by the public has grown up a common front of painters and writers who claim him as a master.'

Émile Zola