Exploring Portraits

Portrait of Mademoiselle Claus

Notes for teachers

ASHMOLEAN

The subject of this portrait by Edouard Manet is Mademoiselle Fanny Claus. Born in 1846 she was the closest friend of Manet's wife Suzanne Leenhoff. Fanny was a concert violinist and a member of the first all-woman string quartet. She was one of Manet's favourite sitters and a member of a close-knit group of friends who also provided the artist with models. She married the artist Pierre Prins (1838–1913), another friend of Manet's, in 1869, but died of tuberculosis just eight years later at the age of 30.

Questions like these may be useful when looking at the portrait with your class.

What is the first thing you spot in the painting?

Where do you think the lady is sitting? What clues are there to help you?

Do you think she looks happy or sad?

Are there any other words you could use to describe her expression?

If you could step into the painting what do you think you could hear, smell or see?

What do you think the weather could be like? What clues are there to help you decide?

When do you think this scene was painted? Do we wear clothes like these today?

This is a preparatory study for another painting. If you were going to add any details what would you add and why?

If you were having a portrait painted where would you like to be and what would you include in your portrait?

Edouard Manet (1832-1883)
Portrait of Mademoiselle Claus, 1868
Oil on canvas - 111 x 70 cm. Currently on display in Pissarro and The Impressionists, Gallery 65

Copyright © Department of Culture, Media and Sport, All Rights Reserved
A zoomable image of this painting is available on our website to use in the classroom on an interactive whiteboard or projector.
www.ashmolean.org/education/resources/

Background information

The 'Portrait of Fanny Claus' is a preparatory study for 'Le Balcon' (1868–9) shown here. Le Balcon' now hangs in the Musée d'Orsay in Pairs and is one of the key images of the Impressionist movement.

Le Balcon shows three friends; Fanny Claus, Berthe Morisot, and Antoine Guillemet. Morisot was a famous impressionist artist herself and a lifelong friend of Manet. She was from a wealthy background and was taught to draw and paint. However she astonished society by making art her life's work. The male figure, Guillemet, is also an impressionist artist who painted mostly landscapes.

Manet's inspiration for both paintings was the sight of people on a balcony, during a summer spent in Boulogne-sur-Mer with his family in 1868. It is an important example of Manet's work from the late 1860s onwards when he began to focus his attention on his family and close friends.

Le Balcon, 1868-9 by Edouard Manet
Copyright © Musee d'Orsay, Paris

The artist

Like his friend Berthe Morisot, Manet was from a wealthy background. His father was a judge and had imagined his son would follow him into the legal profession.
However Manet became instead one of the most influential artists of his time. He broke new ground in choosing subjects for his paintings. Social events, street and cafe scenes as well as war paintings were all part of his repertoire. In 1863, his Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe ("Luncheon on the Grass") aroused the hostility of critics and the enthusiasm of a group of young painters who later formed the nucleus of the Impressionists.

A few activities you could try with your class

- Have a really good look at the painting for 30 seconds. Close your eyes and try to remember what you saw. Open your eyes and fill in the gaps.
- If you could pull back the frame on the right what do you think you might see?
- Play spot the difference with '*Portrait of Fanny Claus* 'and '*Le Balcon'*.
- In the background of *Le Balcon'* there is a second male figure. Who do you think he might be?
- Having compared the two paintings try storyboarding using the paintings as inspiration. Which scene comes first? What do you think the people in the painting will do next?
- Create dialogues between the people in the painting.
- Label details from the painting in French. e.g. la chaise - chair, le balcon - balcony, la robe - dress.
- Recreate the scene in collage using a wide range of materials.
- Design and make hats inspired by the painting.

A visit to the Ashmolean is a perfect learning outside the classroom opportunity for schools.