

'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

Manet the Parisian

Manet was born in 1832 into a prosperous middle-class family and went on to become a key figure in late nineteenth century Paris. Manet broke new ground in his choice of subject matter and painted social events, street and café scenes. He sketched in the boulevards and cafes of Paris and became a true connoisseur of life in the city. Many of his paintings were inspired by these observations.

Manet's work was spurned by art critics during his lifetime because it did not conform with the conventional academic art of the *Salon*, (the exhibition of the French Royal Academy) which tended to focus on landscapes, portraits and history subjects painted in dark colours. However, Manet was much admired by contemporary artists who saw him as their leader in the attack on stale academic values.

Many avant garde artists and writers lived in the Batignolle district of Paris and from the late 1860s Manet was at the centre of evening gatherings at the Café Guerbois where animated discussions on modern art took place. Café regulars included Degas and Fantin-Latour who brought along friends such as Monet, Renoir and Sisley, who were later to be nicknamed the Impressionists. Manet was a father figure to these younger artists but resisted involvement with their exhibitions as paradoxically he maintained that artists should still exhibit at the Paris *Salon*.

The Making of Modern Paris

France had been in constant turmoil since the French revolution in 1789. After the revolution of 1848 Napoleon III became Emperor and set out to make Paris the showpiece of Europe. He commissioned Baron Haussmann to modernise Paris and transform it into a modern capital city.

Haussmann transformed Paris from a cramped medieval city into a splendid new modern capital. Existing streets and houses were demolished to create a network of interconnecting boulevards lined with cafes, restaurants and theatre. Men and women could stroll along boulevards on widened pavements, browsing shop windows, seeing and being seen. Baron Haussmann's new Paris embodied the spirit of the modern age.



'Au café', Edouard Manet, 1869,
Courtesy National Gallery Art, Washington

Paris the style capital

By the 1860s Paris was becoming the style capital of the world. Grand couturier fashion houses opened, as well as department stores selling ready-to wear clothing. New fashion magazines showcased scenes of modern Paris and the fashionable dress of its inhabitants.

Painters and writers intent on bringing a new reality to their work were among the first to see fashion as a vital expression of modern life. Manet and his fellow artists were inspired by fashion plates and started to paint pictures of stylish men and women in contemporary dress as a way of reflecting the spirit of the time.

Writers and poets such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Zola were also at the forefront of the avant garde and very much a part of Bohemian Paris. In Baudelaire's long essay, 'Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne' (The Painter of Modern Life) he encouraged artists to portray contemporary Parisian life and capture the 'look of the moment'. He claimed that modern life was the only subject worth painting because that is what an artist knows best! Manet, a great friend of Baudelaire, shared this view declaring, 'The truth is, we must be of our own time'.

Manet the Flâneur

Manet was the ultimate man about town - the observer, the dandy or, as the French would say, the *flâneur*. He epitomised Baudelaire's concept of the modern artist who observes life with a cool detachment.

In Henri Fantin-Latour's portrait of Manet we see a stylish and successful Parisian dandy rather than as a working artist. Manet is portrayed as an impeccably dressed gentleman complete with top hat and fob watch. He is the quintessential painter of modern life.

'the latest fashion, you see, is absolutely necessary for a painter. It's what matters most'

Edouard Manet



'Portrait of Edouard Manet', Henri Fantin-Latour, 1867
© The Art Institute of Chicago

Mlle Claus the contemporary woman

Manet chose to depict modernity by painting modern men and women in their everyday life, especially in the urban setting. He especially liked to paint female fashion as it was a good reflector of contemporary society. His paintings are a window onto the changing trends and styles in Paris at the time.

In 'Portrait of Mlle Claus', her simple white dress brings an air of informality to the painting and Manet effortlessly conveys the essence of the fabrics without labouring over superficial details. He skilfully uses the deepest black for her shawl and shoes to offset the brilliant pure white of her dress. His mastery of black and white looks back to Frans Hals and Diego Velazquez whom he admired so much.